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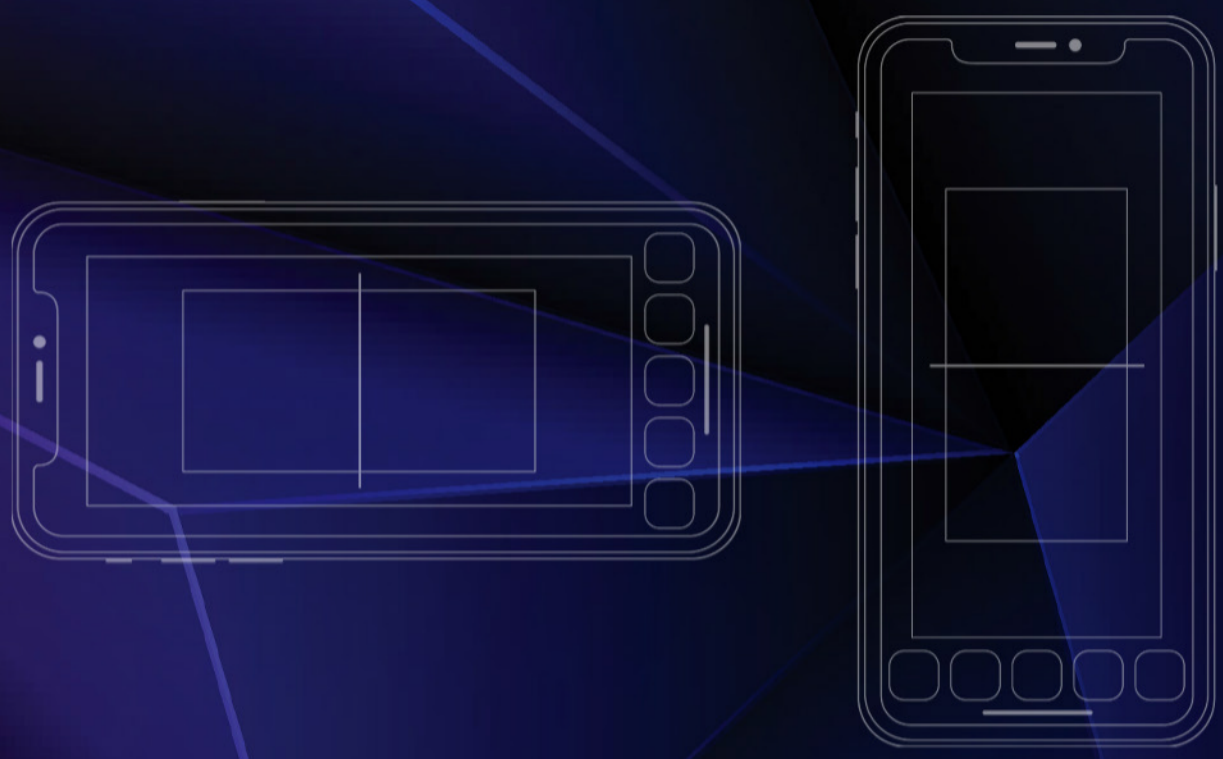

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SUMMARY

NVIDIA'S RISING STAR GETS EVEN BRIGHTER WITH ANOTHER STELLAR QUARTER... **06**

FUKUSHIMA'S RADIOACTIVE WASTEWATER IS BEING RELEASED IN THE PACIFIC... **18**

UBER RAISES THE MINIMUM AGE FOR MOST CALIFORNIA DRIVERS TO 2... **30**

SHEIN AND FOREVER 21 TEAM UP IN HOPES OF EXPANDING REACH OF BOTH... **40**

SAN FRANCISCO LAUNCHES DRIVERLESS BUS SERVICE FOLLOWING ROBOTAXI... **48**

THESE CARS WILL BE GONE AFTER 2023 **58**

WALLET - SWITCHING OUR POCKETS FROM A PHYSICAL TO DIGITAL VERSION **76**

DIGITAL CLONES AND VOCALOIDS MAY BE POPULAR IN JAPAN. ELSEWHERE, THEY... **98**

EUROPE'S SWEEPING RULES FOR TECH GIANTS ARE ABOUT TO KICK IN. HERE'S... **110**

GM'S CRUISE AUTONOMOUS VEHICLE UNIT AGREES TO CUT FLEET IN HALF... **126**

WHITE HOUSE SCIENCE ADVISER CALLS FOR MORE SAFEGUARDS AGAINST... **132**

CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES ASK FTC TO INVESTIGATE GOOGLE FOR TARGETING... **142**

INDIA LANDS A SPACECRAFT NEAR THE MOON'S SOUTH POLE, A FIRST FOR THE... **148**

'BARBIE' FOR $4? NATIONAL CINEMA DAY IS COMING, WITH DISCOUNTED... **158**

BUSINESS TYCOON CARLOS GHOSN'S RISE, FALL AND DRAMATIC ESCAPE IS... **166**

'GRAN TURISMO' MOVIE DRIFTS INTO CLICHES AND VIDEO GAME AESTHETICS **174**

CANADA WILDFIRE EVACUEES CAN'T GET NEWS MEDIA ON FACEBOOK AND... **188**

MICROSOFT BUDGES ON VIDEO GAME STREAMING RIGHTS IN PUSH FOR UK TO... **198**

SOLAR PANELS TO SURROUND DULLES AIRPORT WILL DELIVER POWER TO... **206**

Image: Ross D. Franklin

NVIDIA'S RISING STAR GETS EVEN BRIGHTER WITH ANOTHER STELLAR QUARTER PROPELLED BY SALES OF AI CHIPS

Computer chip maker Nvidia has rocketed into the constellation of Big Tech's brightest stars while riding the artificial intelligence craze that's fueling red-hot demand for its technology.

The latest evidence of Nvidia's ascendance emerged with Wednesday's release of the company's quarterly earnings report. The results covering the May-July period exceeded Nvidia's projections for astronomical sales growth propelled by the company's specialized chips — key components that help power different forms of artificial intelligence, such as Open AI's popular ChatGPT and Google's Bard chatbots.

"This is a new computing platform, if you will, a new computing transition that is happening," Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang said during a conference call with analysts.

Nvidia's revenue for its fiscal second quarter doubled from the same time last year to $13.51 billion, culminating in a profit of $6.2 billion, or $2.48 per share, more than nine times more than the company made a year ago. Both figures were well above the projections of analysts polled by FactSet Research.

And the momentum is still building. The Santa Clara, California, company predicted its revenue for its August-October quarter will total $16 billion, nearly tripling its sales from the same time last year. Analysts had been anticipating $12.6 billion in revenue for that period encompassing Nvidia's fiscal third quarter, according to FactSet.

Nvidia's stock price surged 6% in extended trading after the numbers came out. The shares already have more than tripled so far this year,

Image: Jeff Chiu

a run-up that has boosted Nvidia's market value to $1.2 trillion — a threshold that thrust the company into the tech industry's elite.

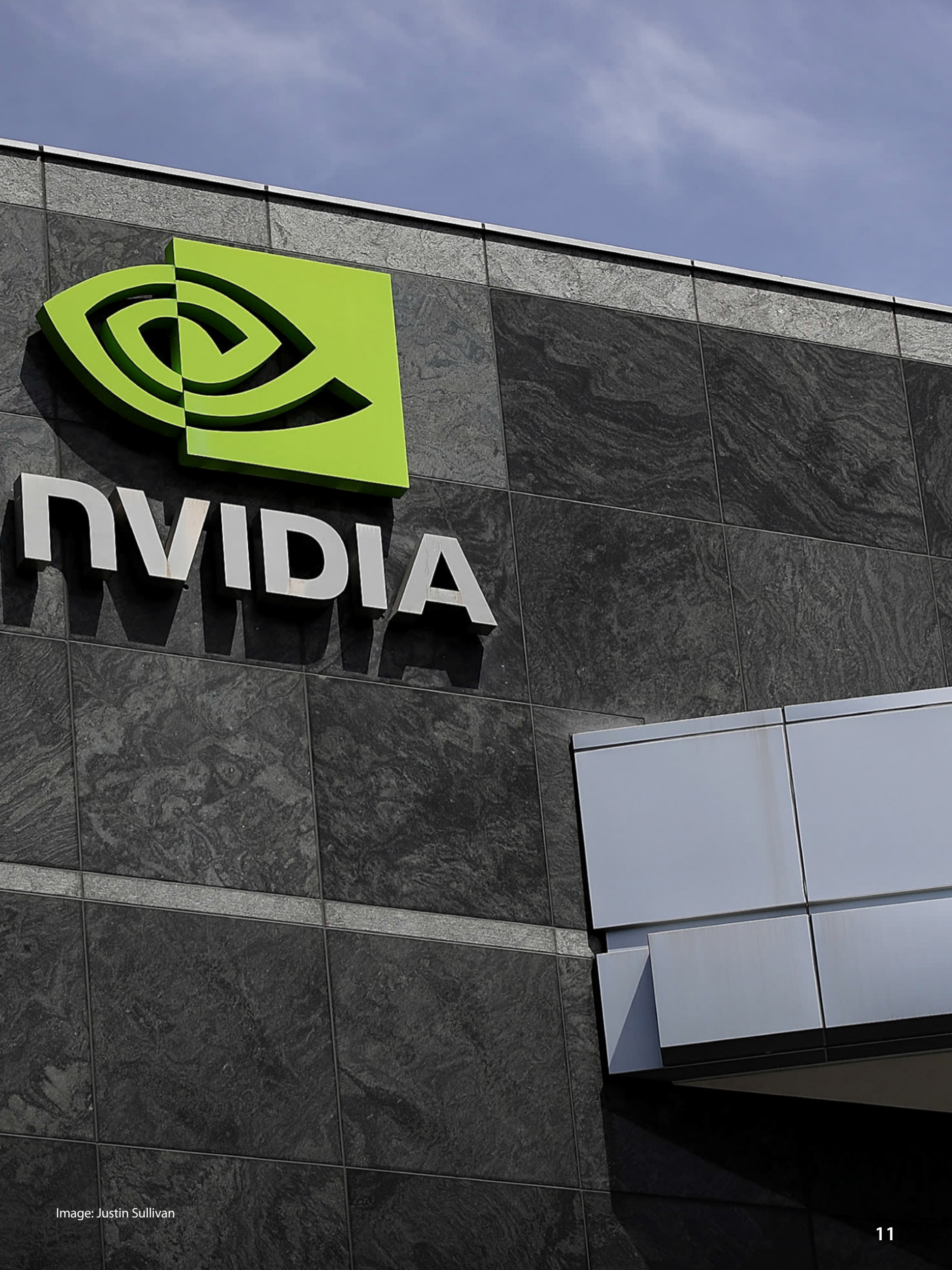
Other stalwarts that are currently or have been recently valued at $1 trillion or above are Apple, Microsoft, Amazon and Google's corporate parent Alphabet.

Now all those tech giants as well as a long line of other firms are snapping up Nvidia chips as they wade deeper into AI — a movement that's enabling cars to drive by themselves, and automating the creation of stories, art and music.

Nvidia has carved out an early lead in the hardware and software needed in the AI-focused shift, partly because Huang began to nudge the company into what was then seen as a still half-baked technology more than a decade ago. While others were still debating the merits of AI, Huang already was looking at ways that Nvidia chipsets known as graphics processing units might be tweaked for AI-related applications to expand beyond their early inroads in video gaming.

By 2018, Huang was convinced that AI would trigger a tectonic shift in technology similar to Apple's 2007 introduction of the iPhone igniting a mobile computing revolution. That conclusion led Huang into what resulted in what he calls a "bet-the-company moment." At the time Huang doubled down on AI, Nvidia's market value stood at about $120 billion.

"I think it's safe to say it was worth it to bet the company" on AI, Huang, 60, said during a presentation earlier this month.



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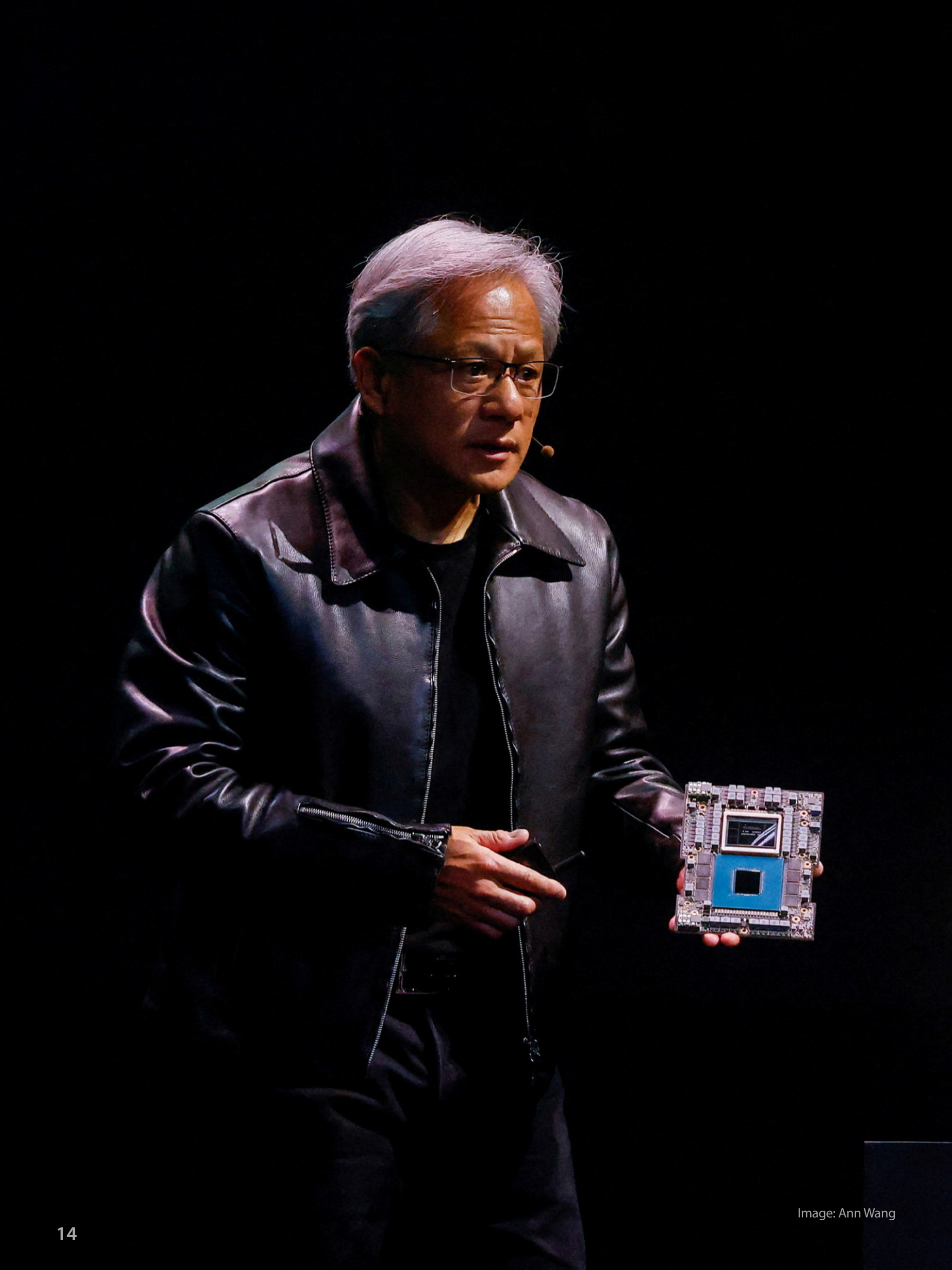


Image: Ann Wang

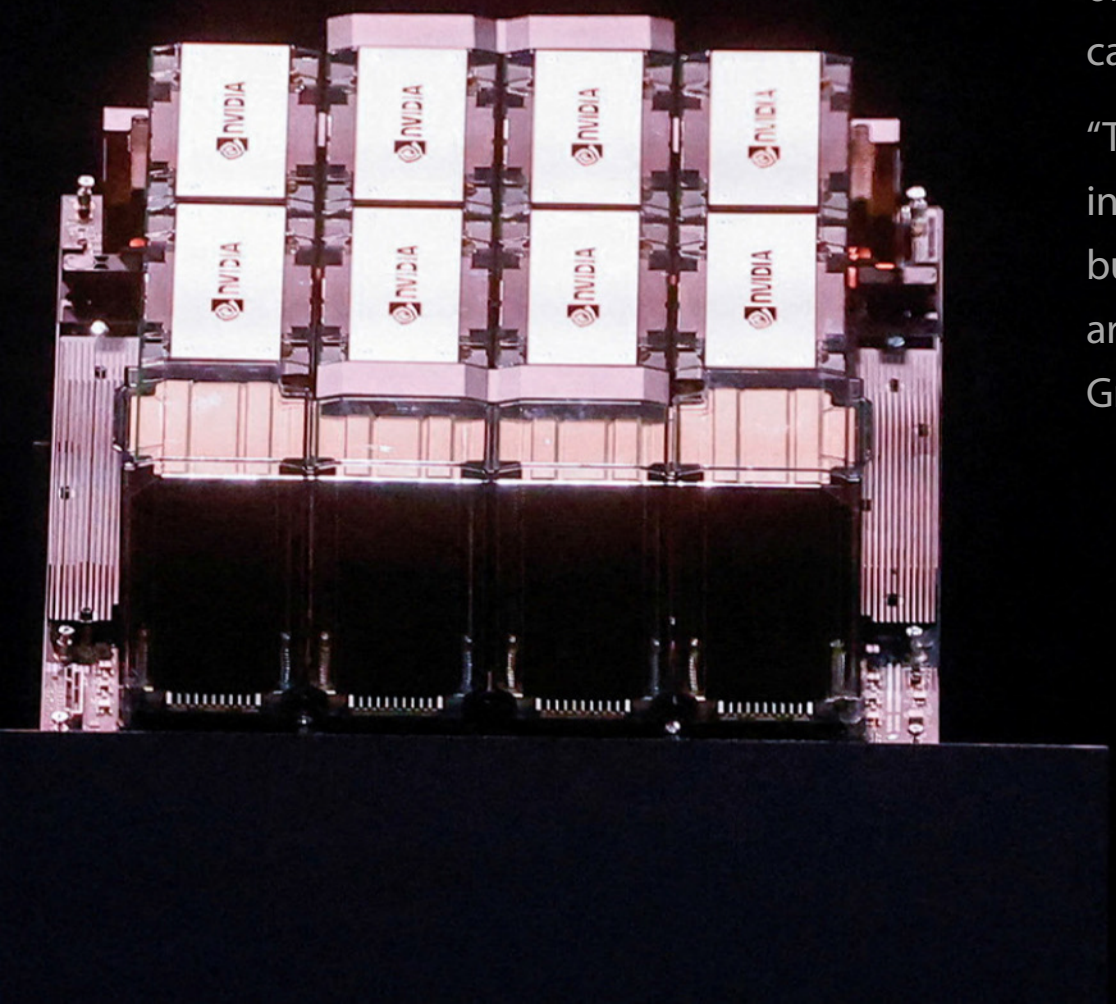
Huang's foresight gave Nvidia a head start in designing software to complement its chips tailored for AI applications, creating "a moat" that other major chipmakers such as Intel and AMD are having trouble getting around during a period of intense demand that is expected to continue into next year, said Bernstein analyst Stacy Rasgon. Nvidia is increasingly pitching a Lego-like combination of GPUs, memory chips and more conventional processing chips enclosed in a big package. In a demonstration earlier this month, Huang showed one such room-sized structure, joking about how it might look if delivered to a doorstep by Amazon.

"Everybody else is trying to catch them now that they see the opportunity is there." Rasgon said.

Huang's vision has prompted Wedbush Securities analyst Dan Ives to hail him as "the Godfather of AI," and established him as one of the world's wealthiest people with an estimated fortune of $42 billion.

While Ives still sees plenty of upside in Nvidia's future growth and stock price, other market observers believe investors are getting carried away.

"This level of hype is dangerous as it could lead investors to assume that these stocks are a silver bullet to build long-term wealth — and they are not, at least not on their own," warned Nigel Green, CEO of deVere Group.



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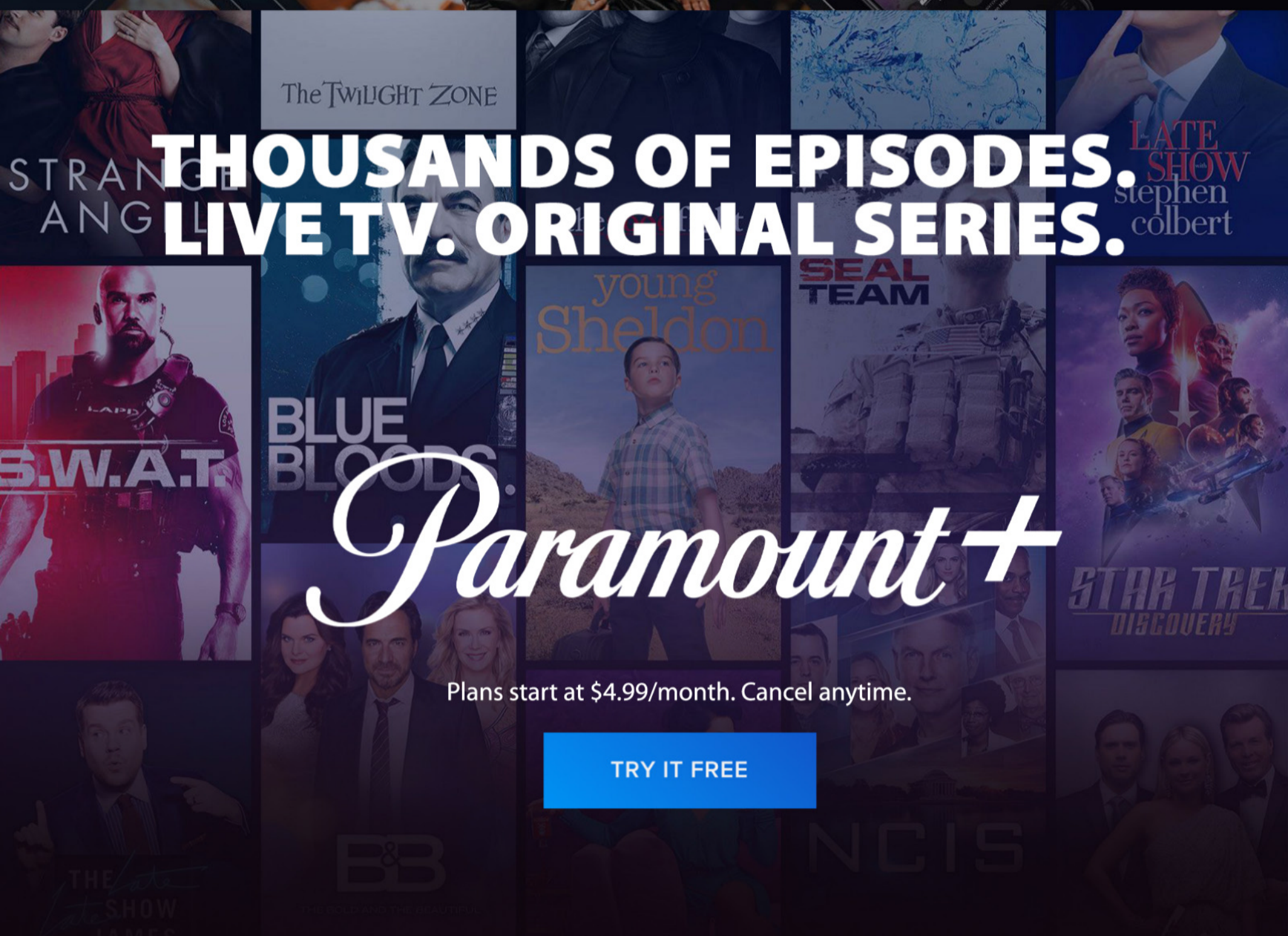

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FUKUSHIMA'S RADIOACTIVE WASTEWATER IS BEING RELEASED IN THE PACIFIC. HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Treated and diluted but still slightly radioactive wastewater from the wrecked Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant is being discharged into the Pacific Ocean.

The first batch being released over the next 17 days is a small part of the tons of water that have accumulated at the plant. But the Japanese government and the plant's operator say releasing the water is an unavoidable step in the decommissioning of the plant, which already will take decades. They say the water is treated and diluted to levels that are safer than international standards. But the plan faces opposition in and outside Japan. Here is a look at the controversy.

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH WASTEWATER?

The March 2011 earthquake and tsunami destroyed the plant's cooling systems, causing three reactors to melt. Highly contaminated cooling water applied to the damaged reactors has leaked continuously to building basements and mixed with groundwater.

The plant operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, has taken steps to limit the amount of groundwater and rainwater entering the reactor area, and has reduced the increase in contaminated water to about 100 tons a day, 1/5 of the initial amount. The water is collected and partly recycled as cooling water after treatment, with the rest stored in around 1,000 tanks, which are already filled to 98% of their 1.37 million-ton capacity.

WHY IS TEPCO RELEASING THE WATER NOW?

The government and TEPCO say they need to empty the tanks and clear them from the plant complex to make room for the plant's

decommissioning and prevent accidental leaks of the tanks.

Japan has obtained support from the International Atomic Energy Agency to improve the transparency and credibility of the release and ensure it meets international safety standards. The government has also stepped up a campaign promoting the plan's safety at home and through diplomatic channels.

WHAT'S IN THE TREATED WATER'?

The water is being treated by what's called an Advanced Liquid Processing System, which can reduce the amounts of more than 60 selected radionuclides to government-set releasable levels, except for tritium, which officials say is safe for humans if consumed in small amounts.

About 70% of the water held in the tanks still contains cesium, strontium, carbon-14 and other radionuclides exceeding government-set levels. It will be re-treated until the concentrations meet those limits, then diluted by more than 100 times its volume of seawater before it is released. That will bring it way below international safety limits, but its radioactivity won't be zero.

HOW SAFE IS IT?

IAEA concluded in a report that the plan, if conducted as designed, will have negligible impact on the environment and human health. IAEA chief Rafael Grossi visited the plant in July and said he was satisfied with preparations.

Japan's government says the release of tritium into the sea is a routine practice by nuclear plants around the world and that the amount will be several times lower than from plants in China and South Korea.

Scientists generally support the IAEA's conclusion, while some call for more attention to dozens of low-dose radionuclides that remain in the water, saying data on their long-term effects on the environment and marine life are insufficient.

Experts say the release of treated water from Fukushima is much less challenging than the daunting task of removing deadly radioactive debris that remains in the damaged reactors.

HOW IS IT BEING RELEASED?

TEPCO executive Junichi Matsumoto says the release began Thursday with the least radioactive water to ensure safety. After samples are analyzed in final testing, the water is sent through a thin black pipe to a coastal area where it is diluted with hundreds of times its volume in seawater.

The diluted water will enter an undersea tunnel and be discharged a few minutes later from a point 1 kilometer (0.6 mile) off the coast. The release will be gradual and will continue for decades until the decommissioning of the plant is finished, TEPCO officials say. Matsumoto said the slow release will further reduce the environmental impact.

The company plans to release 31,200 tons of treated water by the end of March 2024, which would empty only 10 tanks because of the continued production of wastewater at the plant. The pace will later pick up.

WHY ARE PEOPLE WORRIED?

Fukushima's fisheries and tourism industries and its economy are still recovering from the 2011 disaster. Fisheries groups worry about a further damage to the reputation of their seafood.

Fukushima's current catch is only about one-fifth its pre-disaster level due to a decline in the fishing population and smaller catch sizes.

The head of the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives, Masanobu Sakamoto, said on Monday that "scientific safety and the sense of safety are different."

Groups in South Korea and China have also raised concerns, turning the release into a political and diplomatic issue. China has stepped up radiation testing of fishery and agricultural products from Fukushima and nine other prefectures, halting exports at customs for weeks, Fisheries Agency officials say.

WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

The Japanese government says potential risks from the release of treated water are limited to reputational damage resulting from rumors, rather than scientific study. It has allocated 80 billion yen ($550 million) to support fisheries and seafood processing and combat potential reputation damage. TEPCO has also promised to deal with reputational damage claims.

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UBER RAISES THE MINIMUM AGE FOR MOST CALIFORNIA DRIVERS TO 25, SAYING INSURANCE COSTS ARE TOO HIGH

Image: Nam Y. Huh

Uber raised the minimum age requirement for most of its new drivers in California to 25 on Thursday under rules the company said are necessary because of the rising costs of commercial auto insurance in the state.

The new rule applies only to drivers signing up to transport passengers with Uber's ride-hailing platform, and not for those delivering food with Uber Eats. Previously drivers as young as 19 could sign up.

Those under 25 who activated their accounts prior to Wednesday can continue to drive for Uber, the company said.

Insurance rates for Uber's California drivers are significantly higher than for personal vehicles or taxi drivers, according to a company statement announcing the change.

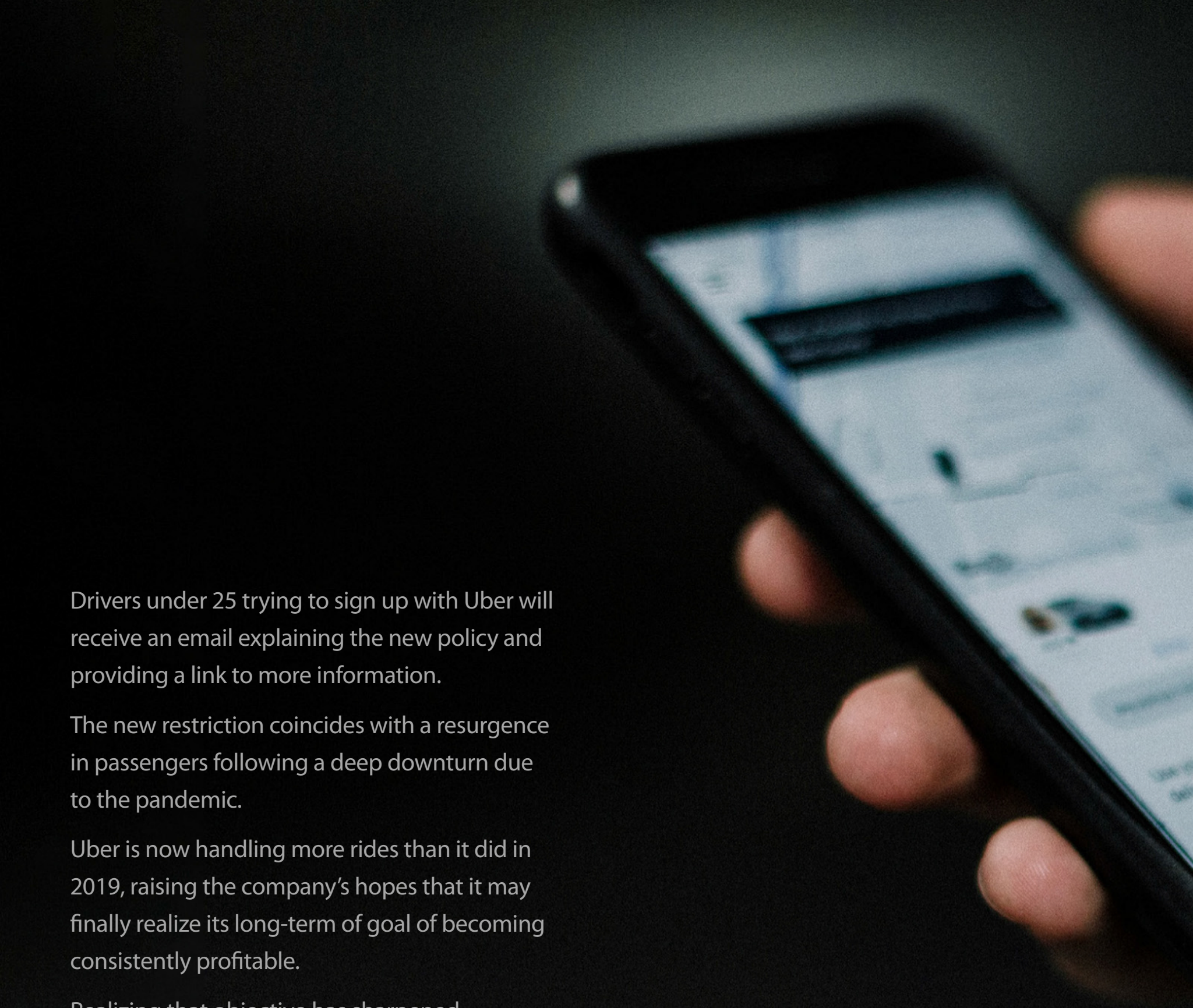
"As a result of these lopsided requirements, personal injury attorneys have created a cottage industry specializing in suing rideshare platforms like ours, pushing Uber's California state-mandated commercial insurance costs to rise by more than 65% in just two years," the company said. "By increasing the age requirement for new drivers to 25, we hope to mitigate the growth of those costs."

All 50 states require commercial insurance for drivers to earn money with a ride-hailing service. Uber maintains commercial auto insurance for drivers — including at least $1 million of liability coverage once a ride is accepted. Personal auto insurance typically doesn't cover activity on ride-hailing apps.

The minimum age is already 25 for those driving for Lyft, Uber's main competitor.

Uber

Image: Viktor Bystrov



Drivers under 25 trying to sign up with Uber will receive an email explaining the new policy and providing a link to more information.

The new restriction coincides with a resurgence in passengers following a deep downturn due to the pandemic.

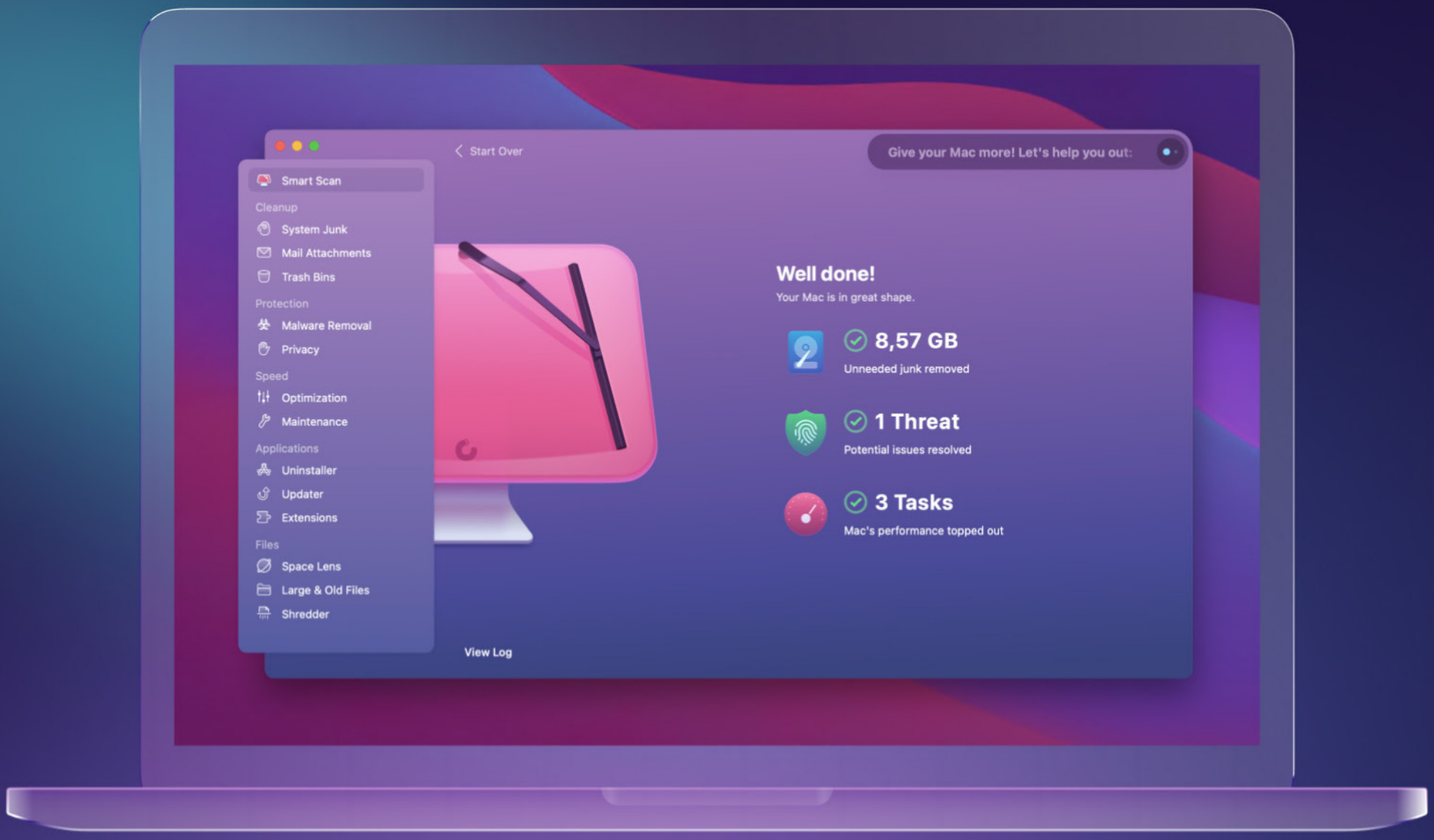
Uber is now handling more rides than it did in 2019, raising the company's hopes that it may finally realize its long-term of goal of becoming consistently profitable.

Realizing that objective has sharpened management's focus on cost control, a factor that may have contributed to the decision to drop 25-and-under drivers.

Uber's food delivery service, which will continue to let that demographic work as drivers, accounts for one-third of the company's revenue.

Uber hopes to work with state lawmakers and industry experts "to discuss legislative and regulatory changes that will improve the experience for all California drivers," according to its statement.

Image: Priscilla Du Preez



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SHEIN AND FOREVER 21 TEAM UP IN HOPES OF EXPANDING REACH OF BOTH FAST-FASHION RETAILERS

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VER21

Fast fashion retailers Shein and Forever 21 are going into business together.

Under a partnership agreement announced Thursday, the Chinese-founded Shein will acquire about one-third interest in Sparc Group, Forever 21's operator. Sparc will also become a minority shareholder in Shein.

The deal is expected to expand Forever 21's distribution on Shein's global e-commerce platform, which has attracted 150 million online users. In turn, the partnership "also offers the opportunity to test" Shein product sales and returns in physical Forever 21 stores across the U.S., the companies said in a joint release.

Forever 21 has more than 540 locations worldwide and online. The announcement did not disclose financial details of the deal. The Wall Street Journal first reported the deal between Shein and Sparc Thursday.

Sparc is a joint venture that includes brand development company Authentic Brands Group and mall operator Simon Property Group. Beyond the U.S.-based Forever 21 — which was bought out of bankruptcy just three years ago — Sparc also manufactures and distributes apparel for brands like Aéropostale, Eddie Bauer and Reebook.

Shein and Forever 21 have both faced strong criticism around the environmental impact of their fast fashion production and allegations of unethical labor practices. Earlier this year, Shein was notably accused of copyright infringement. There's also been ongoing concerns among some lawmakers and advocacy groups about its supply chains.

In May, a bipartisan group of two dozen lawmakers asked the Securities and Exchange Commission to put the brakes on an initial public offering by Shein until it verified that it does not use forced labor from the country's predominantly Muslim Uyghur population. A June Congressional report also unloaded a blistering critique of Shein and another Chinese fashion retailer, Temu.

The report is part of an ongoing Congressional investigation into products offered to American consumers that could be made with forced labor in China. As part of the probe, the committee sent letters in early May to brands Nike and Adidas, as well as Shein and Temu asking for information about their compliance with the anti-forced labor law.

At the time, Shein said that the company's "policy is to comply with the customs and import laws of the countries in which we operate." It also said it has "zero tolerance" for forced labor and has implemented a robust system to ensure compliance with U.S. law.

Shein, which is now headquarted in Singapore, has tried to distance itself from China in recent years. According to The Journal, Shein doesn't sell goods in China and denies sourcing cotton from the country.

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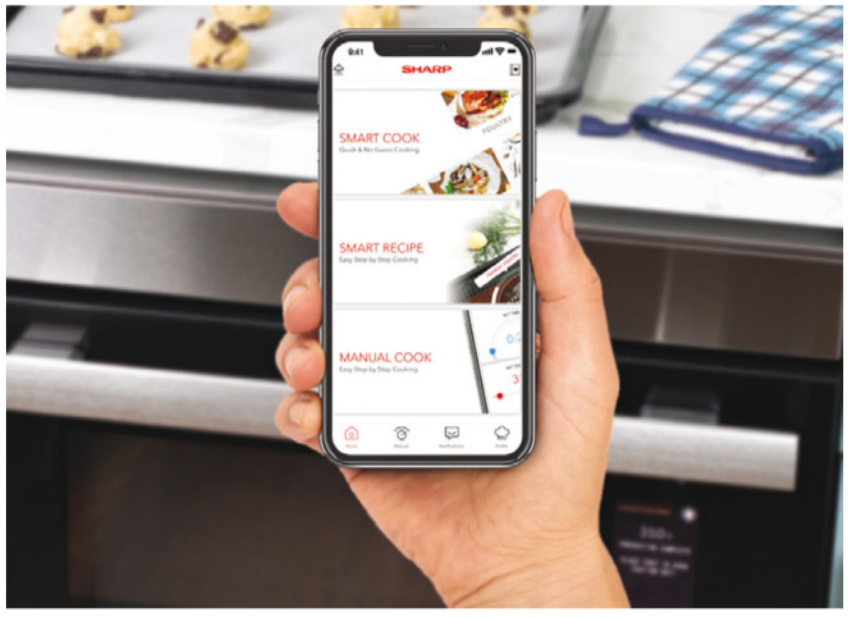

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First came the robotaxis. Then the driverless buses arrived.

San Francisco has launched an autonomous shuttle service -- less than a week after California regulators approved the expansion of robotaxis despite traffic and safety concerns.

The free shuttle will run daily in a fixed route called the Loop around Treasure Island, the site of a former U.S. Navy base in the middle of San Francisco Bay. The Loop makes seven stops, connecting residential neighborhoods with stores and community centers. About 2,000 people live on the island.

The all-electric vehicle, which doesn't have a driver's seat or steering wheel, is staffed with an attendant who can drive the bus with a handheld controller if necessary. The county is offering the shuttle service as part of a grant-funded pilot program to assess how autonomous vehicles can supplement the public transit system.

"Having the attendant on board makes everyone feel comfortable," said Tilly Chang, executive director of the San Francisco County Transportation Authority. "This is just a demonstration for now to see, what does it look like and how does it work to have a driverless shuttle in a low-volume, low-speed environment?"

San Francisco is one of a growing number of cities worldwide that are testing the safety and potential of self-driving vehicles to transform public transportation.

The shuttles are operated by Beep, an Orlando, Florida-based company that has run similar pilot programs in more than a dozen U.S.

communities, including service at the Miami Zoo, Mayo Clinic and Yellowstone National Park.

“These shuttles are built for first-mile, last-mile, short connectivity routes. They’re not intended to take the place of a bus system,” said Beep project manager Shelley Caran. “The autonomous vehicle will have a better reaction time than a human and it will offer a more reliable service because they won’t be distracted.”

During a test ride, the shuttle drove slowly and cautiously in autonomous mode. An attendant manually steered the vehicle around a utility truck that blocked part of the road.

“I didn’t feel unsafe,” said Dominic Lucchesi, an Oakland resident who was among the first to ride the autonomous shuttle. “I thought that it made some abrupt stops, but otherwise I felt like I was riding any other bus for the most part.”

The boxy shuttle, which can sit up to 10 passengers, will operate 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day and circle the Loop every 20 minutes. The city has two shuttles — one can charge while the other ferries passengers.

The autonomous shuttle pilot project was launched after the California Public Utilities Commission voted to allow two rival robotaxi companies, Cruise and Waymo, to offer around-the-clock passenger service in San Francisco.

The approval came despite widespread complaints that the driverless taxis make unexpected stops, cause traffic backups and block emergency vehicles. The city asked the commission to pause the robotaxi expansion.

Cruise, a subsidiary of General Motors, reported on social media that one of its robotaxis crashed

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into a city fire truck last week, sending one passenger to the hospital.

Experts don't anticipate the same problems with driverless buses because they're expected to be staffed with drivers or attendants for the foreseeable future.

"Trained operators are going to be required even as we increase automation," said Nikolas Martelaro, autonomous-vehicle researcher at Carnegie Mellon University. "So the question there may not be how worried should someone be about losing their job versus what should they be thinking about the potential training that's required."

Autonomous driving technology could make buses safer, but requiring drivers or attendants on-board could undermine one of their perceived advantages: reduced labor costs.

"We still have to find a market for them," said Art Guzzetti, vice president at the American Public Transportation Association. "We're doing it to make the trip better, more efficient, not to take the worker's job."

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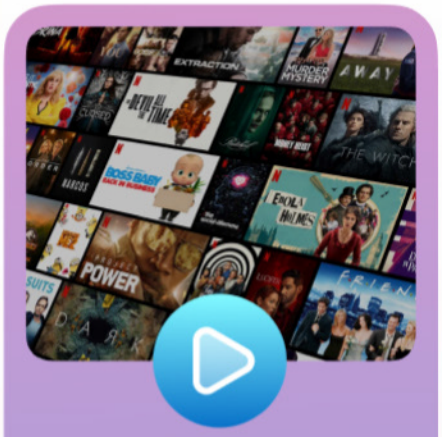

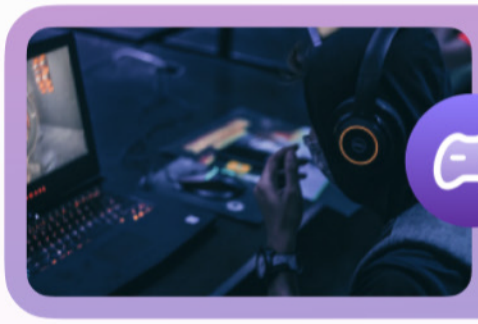

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THESE CARS WILL BE GONE AFTER 2023

Just as TV shows get canceled due to poor performance or changing customer tastes, the same happens for cars and trucks. Sluggish sales have often been the deciding factor in ending a model's life cycle, but the industry's shift toward electric vehicles is also becoming a major driving force. These cancellations tend to fly under the radar until it is too late for most people to try to snag a deal. But for people who don't mind that a vehicle's lineage is ending, these cars can make for a good value because they are more likely to be discounted or potentially become a high-value classic. To assist potential buyers, experts have highlighted the most notable

models that will be phased out this year. This list is sorted by the manufacturer's suggested retail price and includes the destination charge.

CHEVROLET BOLT EV/EUV

The Chevrolet Bolt EV debuted for 2017 and represented a big leap forward for EVs because of its relatively low price, spacious interior, fun driving dynamics, and long driving range of 238 miles. Since then, Chevy has updated the Bolt's design, increased its driving range and added the slightly larger Bolt EUV in 2022. The Bolt's discontinuation is surprising considering sales are better than ever, but Chevy's parent company GM is making room for the production of its upcoming electric trucks and SUVs based on a new EV architecture. Interestingly, the Bolt is one of the few cars on our list to potentially rise from the ashes, as the automaker recently announced that a new Bolt is in the works.

Starting MSRP: $27,495 for Bolt EV; $28,795 for Bolt EUV

MAZDA CX-9

The CX-9 SUV has been Mazda's largest family hauler since 2007. Unlike most of its three-row competition, the CX-9 prioritizes fun driving dynamics and a premium-looking interior that almost rivals the cabins from luxury brands. It also has a quiet and comfortable ride. However, the CX-9's small cargo area and cramped third row make it a suboptimal choice for larger families. The CX-9 is bowing out in favor of the CX-90, a completely redesigned and improved three-row SUV that still shares the outgoing model's premium cabin and strong acceleration.

Starting MSRP: $40,125

SRS AIRBA

DODGE CHARGER AND CHALLENGER

Typically, vehicles are discontinued because of slow sales. But in this case the still popular Charger sedan and Challenger coupe are being phased out as Dodge's parent company Stellanits transitions toward an all-electric future. The closely related Chrysler 300 is also on the chopping block. The Challenger and Charger are appealing thanks to menacing styling, muscular V8 engines and comfortable interiors. A series of special "Final Call" Charger and Challenger models might hold appeal for collectors too.

Starting MSRP (V8 models): $42,400 for Challenger; $45,565 for Charger

MERCEDES-BENZ C-CLASS & E-CLASS | COUPES & CONVERTIBLES

Shoppers who fancy the open-air experience of a Mercedes convertible or the stylish looks of a sporty coupe will soon have less choice: The two-door models of the C-Class and E-Class will be no longer after 2023. The more popular sedan body styles continue on but Mercedes has been paring down its gas-powered lineup while expanding its all-electric one. Fortunately, Mercedes isn't leaving these shoppers completely high and dry. The all-new CLE, available as a coupe and convertible, will replace all four models.

Starting MSRP: $50,700 for C-Class coupe; $58,400 for C-Class convertible; $70,900 for E-Class coupe; $78,050 for E-Class convertible

AUDI R8

Since 2008, the R8 and its convertible Spyder variant have served as Audi's halo car. The supercar's Lamborghini-sourced V10 engine blasted it from 0 to 60 mph in an incredible 3.0 seconds when we tested it. Besides its blistering acceleration, the R8 touts athletic handling, a comfortable ride and superb build quality. The Audi also sets itself apart from its flamboyant rivals thanks to its sophisticated design. But as with most supercars, it guzzles down gas fast. Like the other vehicles on this list, the R8's discontinuation is a result of Audi's push for electric vehicles. We expect its upcoming electric replacement to pack even more power and performance, though the evocative sound of the R8's V10 will be missed.

Starting MSRP: $160,095

With the automotive industry shifting toward an all-electric future, it's expected that some models will be replaced by all-electric variants or permanently discontinued. Some will be sad to see these models go, but there's an opportunity to purchase one new if you act quickly.

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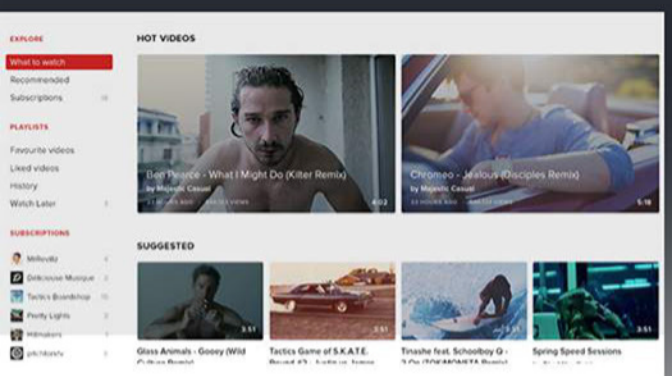

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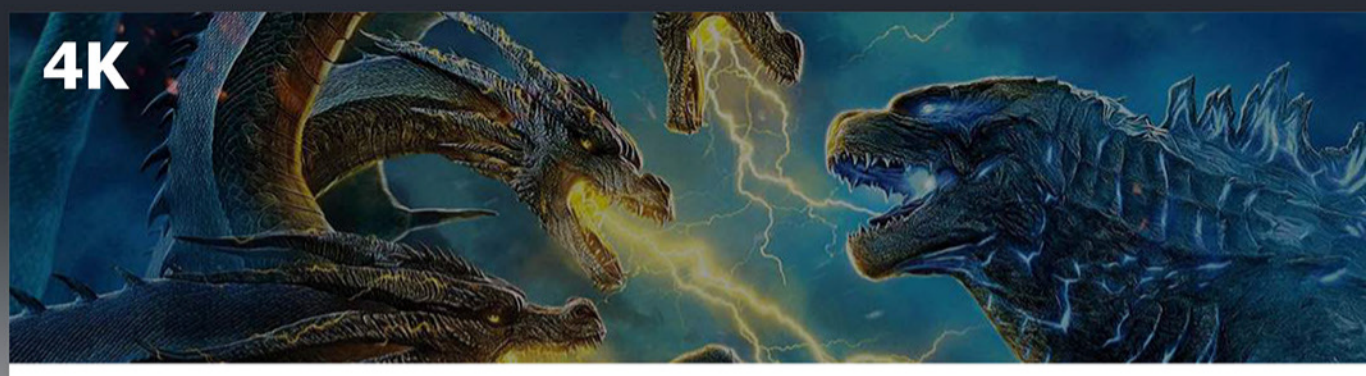

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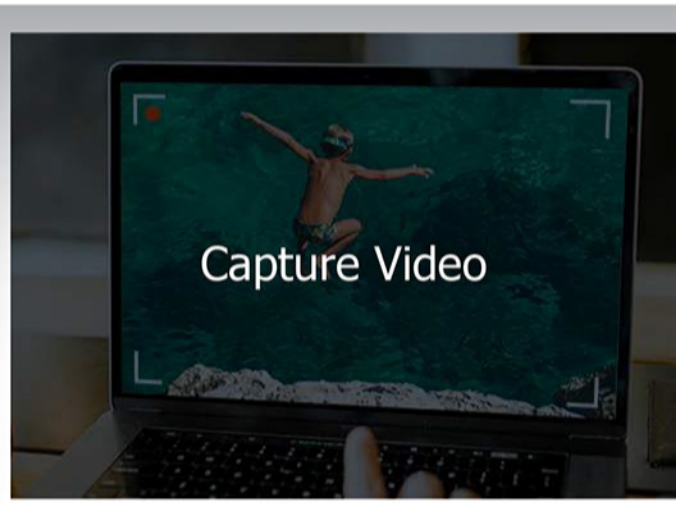

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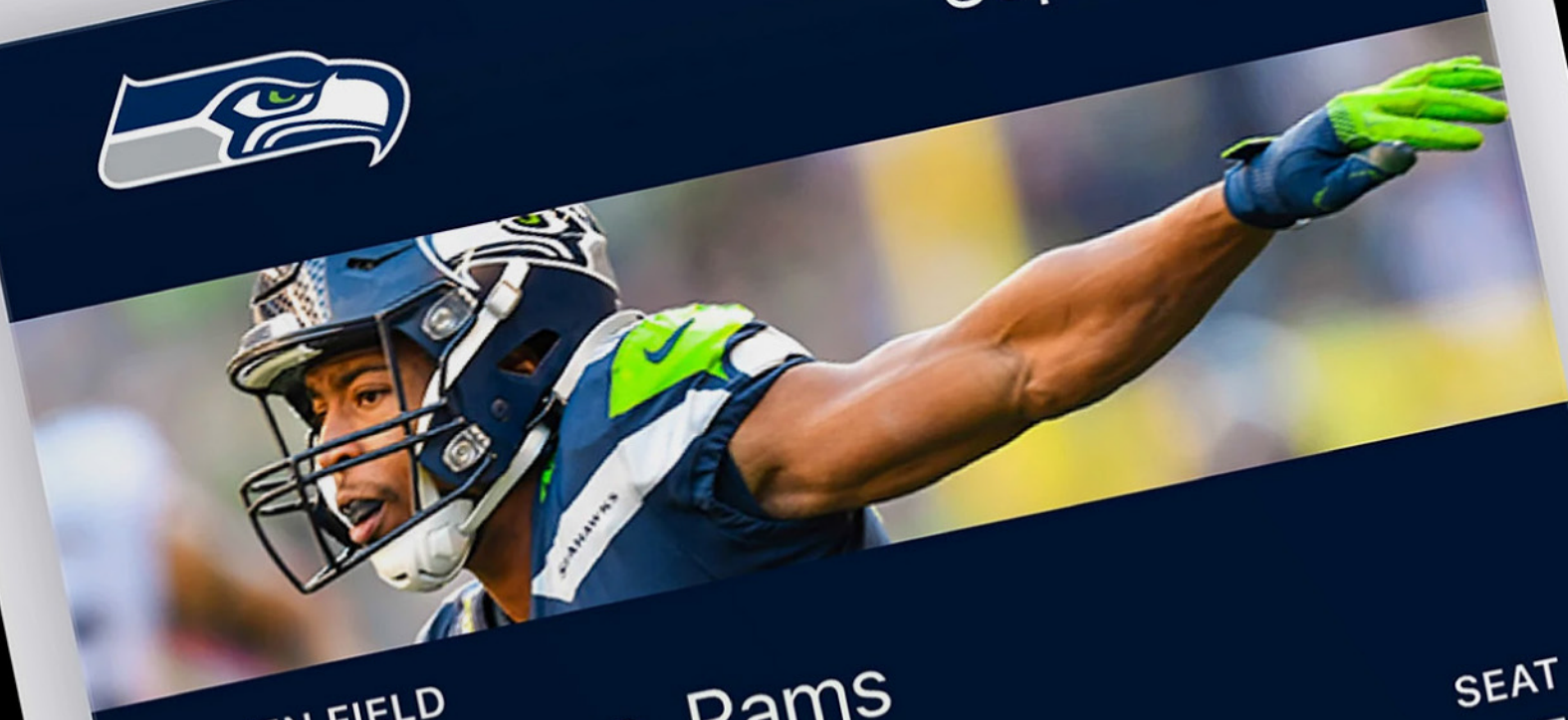

LUMEN FIELD
Seahawks vs. Rams

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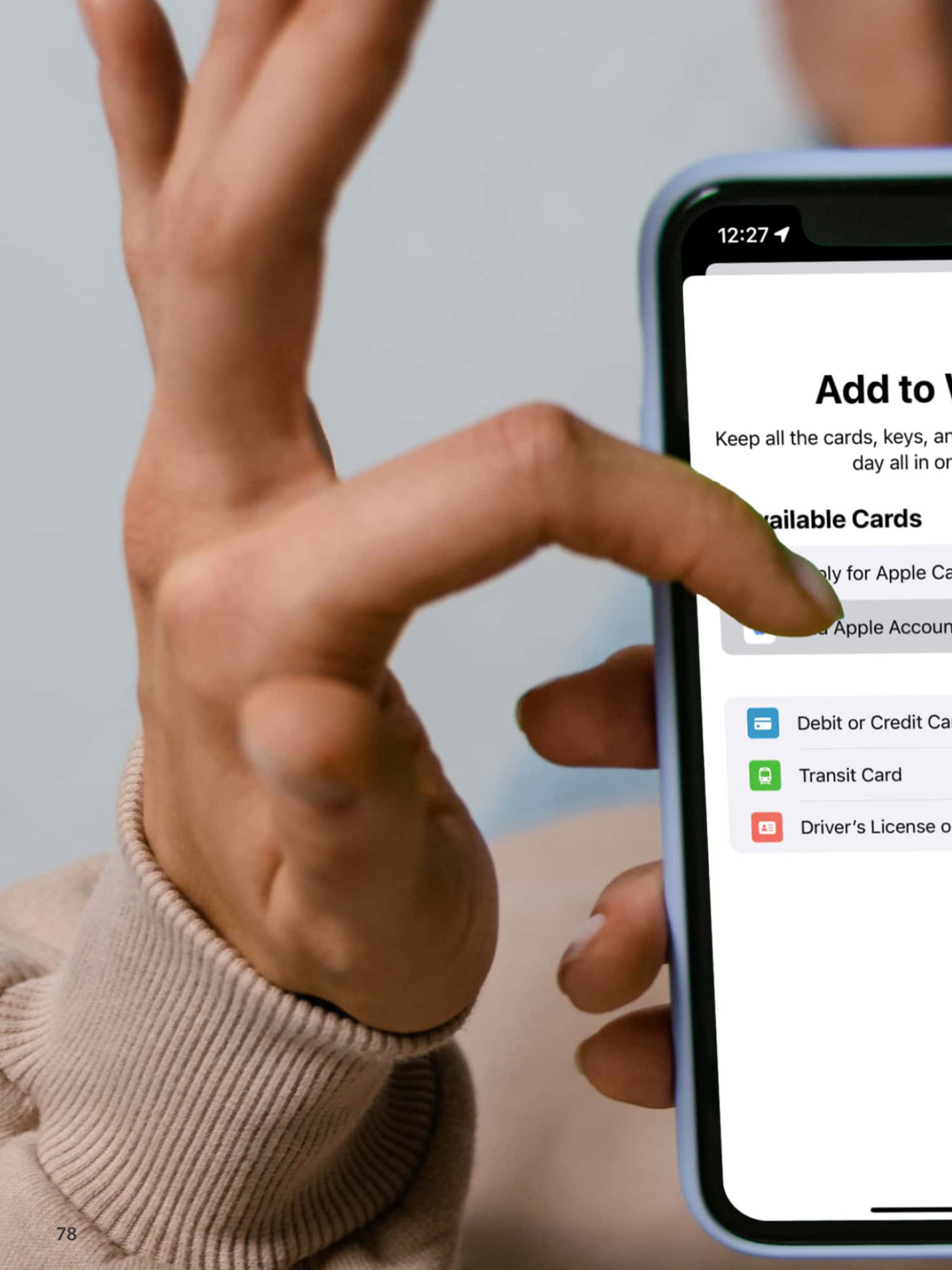
Wallet

SWITCHING OUR POCKETS FROM A PHYSICAL TO DIGITAL VERSION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In a world where the blend of technology and finance is redefining consumer experiences, Apple has been at the forefront. By shifting the function of the physical wallet to the iPhone, Apple has ushered in a revolutionary transition in how people manage, carry, and spend.

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EVERYTHING IN ONE PLACE

From the launch of the Apple Wallet, Apple Pay, and, more recently, Apple Card, Apple has sought to create a solution that would replace nearly everything in your wallet. This digital transformation was not instantaneous. It took years, but today, an iPhone user can pay with ease. Indeed, through Apple Pay, transactions are just a tap away. No more fumbling with cards or counting coins. More recently, select US States now allow digital IDs and driver's licenses, meaning there's less worry about forgetting or losing essential identification. Be it unlocking a vehicle, entering a hotel room, or even using public transport, Apple's contactless keys, integrated with HomeKit, **are redefining access** whilst everything from boarding passes to movie tickets are available in a virtual format. It simplifies logistics and reduces waste and, in recent years, has made the Wallet app an indispensable tool on iOS.

The crux of this ecosystem is ensuring security and privacy. With every new feature, Apple places a strong emphasis on safeguarding user data, which has become a unique selling point for its services. Though Google and other competitors have tried to offer a similar approach with their own technology, none can match the simplicity and appeal of Apple's.

TRANSFORMING FINANCE

One cannot discuss Apple's financial revolution without mentioning the Apple Card. This credit card experience broke traditional molds by simplifying the application process, eliminating fees, and rewarding users with Daily Cash on every

purchase. Adding to the Apple Card's success is the introduction of the **Savings account by Goldman Sachs. In just a few months, the service amassed over $10 billion in deposits** highlighting its widespread acceptance. The high-yield APY and user-friendly features like the auto deposit of Daily Cash have played a pivotal role in this achievement. This strategic collaboration comes when Americans' trust in banks has seen a declining trend. Contrastingly, Apple continues to shine as a trusted brand, bolstering its position and the potential success of its FinTech ventures.

The new high-yield savings account, however, isn't Apple's first dive into the financial waters. In addition to this offering, Apple has recently unveiled a series of financial products, integrating more and more into every financial facet of its consumers' lives. With Goldman Sachs as the backbone, Apple is on a quest to redefine the traditional banking experience. Interestingly, the push into the financial sphere isn't novel. Decades ago, Sears Roebuck, once a retail titan, ventured into the banking world, though ultimately without sustained success. Apple's strategic alliance with Goldman Sachs, an institution with a storied history and considerable infrastructure, provides a sound platform that Sears lacked, enabling it to possibly transcend the failures of the past.

jetBlue

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Apple's ambition seems clear: to position its digital wallet as the ultimate financial dashboard for its customers. Its vision aligns closely with the trajectory of super apps like China's AliPay, which have evolved into all-encompassing platforms catering to diverse consumer needs. However, Apple's ascendancy hasn't been without contention. Its dominance, especially regarding its tap-to-pay functionality, has raised eyebrows and attracted regulatory scrutiny. Nevertheless, with its recent high-yield savings account offering, Apple aims not only at profit but to capture an even larger slice of the iPhone users' financial activities.

CHALLENGING TIMES

The success of Apple Card hasn't been without its challenges, either. Reports earlier this year pointed out that the Apple Card caused more than a billion dollars in losses for Goldman Sachs. Diving deeper, the losses stemmed mainly from loan-loss provisions due to unpaid credit card balances and loans. Goldman's partnership with Apple, while innovative, has seen rocky times. As of Q2 2023, the bank reported a net loss of $667 million from its "Platform Solutions" division, which includes the Apple Card. Their consumer banking venture, especially the Apple Card, has not performed as expected. Goldman Sachs CEO, David Solomon, admitted in an interview about their underperformance in consumer banking offerings. According to one report, the **company is planning to "find a way out" of its deal amidst the similar failure of its own consumer banking venture Marcus,** but we don't know for sure what the future holds just yet.

One reason might be the lack of experienced staff in consumer services, combined with

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underestimating the competition. This tumultuous journey with Goldman Sachs sparked rumors that **Apple might soon part ways and potentially form a partnership with Amex.** Apple is **reportedly happy to agree to a partnership with American Express** and would prefer a partnership rather than funding the card and banking service on its own finance. Apple could become a major player in the banking industry if it wanted, but the regulations and costs involved could prove an expensive mistake for the brand.

In the months and years ahead, as consumers feel the pinch and brands push back on hiring and expansions amidst the global economic downturn, it will be fascinating to see where Apple takes its finance business next. There's already **been talk of a new rent-don't-buy model for the iPhone** as an attempt to better finance products and get the latest devices in front of the right audiences, but we don't know for certain what that might look like right now. All we do know is that Apple is keen to further expand its Wallet business and unlock new revenue streams.

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There's no denying that Apple Wallet has revolutionized the way we spend and manage our money, and with developments likely around the corner, we can't wait to see what's next.

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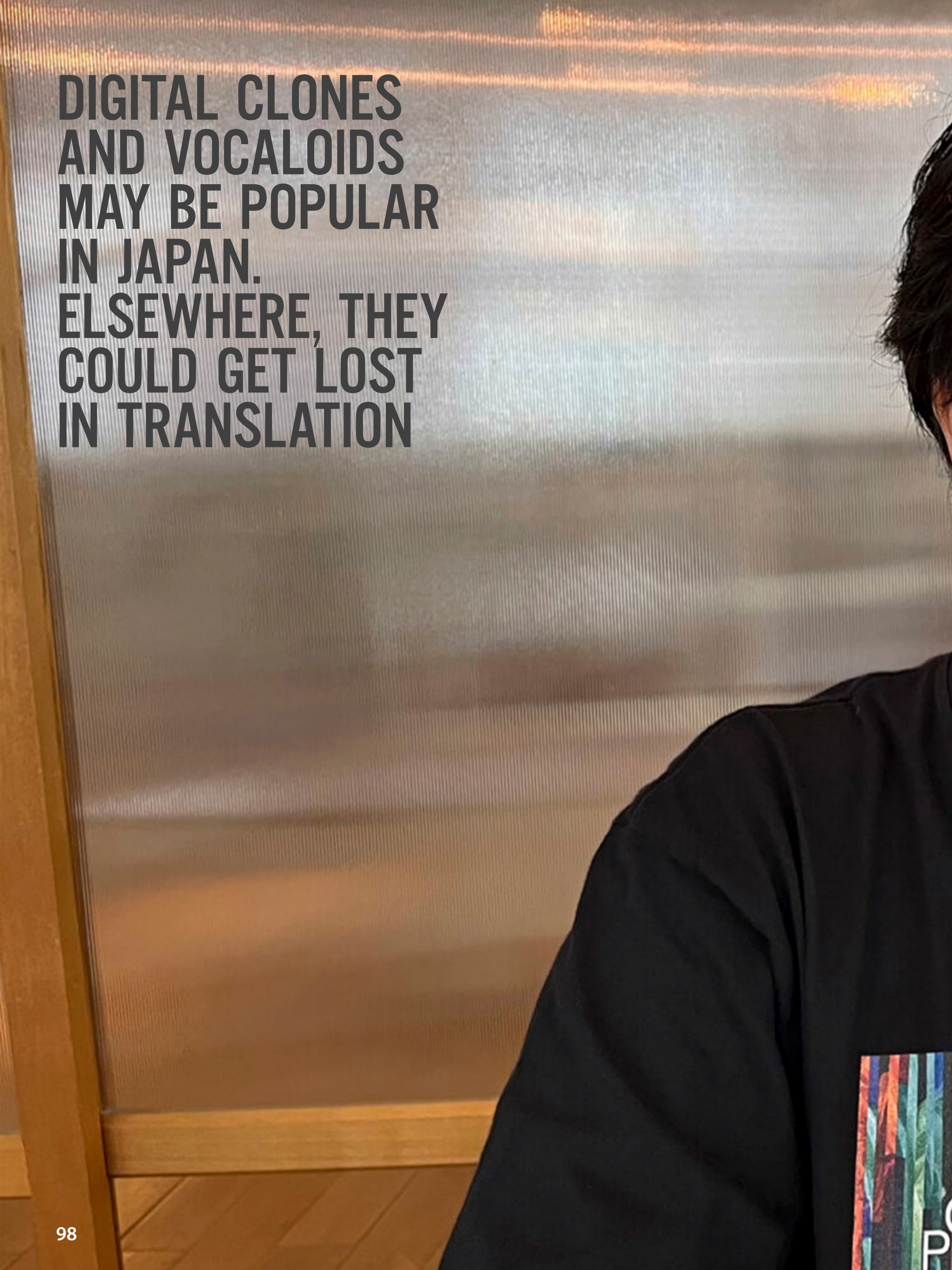
DIGITAL CLONES AND VOCALOIDS MAY BE POPULAR IN JAPAN. ELSEWHERE, THEY COULD GET LOST IN TRANSLATION



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Kazutaka Yonekura dreams of a world where everyone will have their very own digital "clone" — an online avatar that could take on some of our work and daily tasks, such as appearing in Zoom meetings in our place.

Yonekura, chief executive of Tokyo startup Alt Inc., believes it could make our lives easier and more efficient.

His company is developing a digital double, an animated image that looks and talks just like its owner. The digital clone can be used, for example, by a recruiter to carry out preliminary job interviews, or by a physician to screen patients ahead of checkups.

"This liberates you from all the routine (tasks) that you must do tomorrow, the day after tomorrow and the day after that," as he showed off his double — a thumbnail video image of Yonekura on the computer screen, with a synthesized version of his voice.

When his digital clone is asked "What kind of music do you like," it pauses for several seconds, then goes into a long-winded explanation about Yonekura's fondness for energetic rhythmical music such as hip-hop or rock 'n' roll.

A bit mechanical perhaps — but any social gaffes have been programmed out.

Yonekura, 46, argues that the technology is more personal than Siri, ChatGPT or Google AI. Most importantly, it belongs to you and not the technology company that created it, he said.

For now, having a digital double is expensive. Each Alt clone costs about 20 million yen ($140,000), so it will likely take some time before there's a clone for everyone.

In creating a digital double, information about a person is skimmed off social media sites and publicly available records in a massive data collection effort, and stored in the software. The data is constantly updated, keeping in synch with the owner's changing habits and tastes.

Yonekura believes a digital clone could pave the way for a society where people can focus on being creative and waste less time on tedious interactions.

For many Japanese — the nation that gave the world Pokemon, karaoke, Hello Kitty and emojis — the digital clone is as friendly as an animation character.

But Yonekura acknowledges cultures are different and that Westerners may not like the idea of a digital clone as much.

"I can't tell you how many times I've been asked: Why does it have to be a personal clone, and not just a digital agent?" he said, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Yonekura's company has drawn mostly domestic investments of more than 6 billion yen ($40 million), including venture capital funds run by major Japanese banks, while also building collaborative relationships with academia, including the University of Southern California and the University of Tokyo.

But large-scale production of digital doubles is a long way off — for now, the company offers more affordable voice recognition software and virtual assistant technology.

Matt Alt, who co-founded AltJapan Co., a company that produces English-language versions of popular Japanese video games and

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who has written books about Japan, including "Pure Invention: How Japan Made the Modern World," says the digital clone idea makes more sense culturally in Japan.

Ninjas, the famous feudal Japanese undercover warriors, were known for "bunshin-jutsu" techniques of creating the illusion of a double or a helper in battle to confuse the opponent. The bunshin-jutsu idea has been adopted and is common in modern-day Japanese video games and manga comic books and graphic novels.

"Who wouldn't want a helping hand from someone who understood them intimately?" Alt said but added that in the West, the idea of an existing double is "more frightening."

"There is the 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers,' for instance, or even the brooms that multiply like a virus in Disney's 'Fantasia,'" he said.

INCS toenter Co., another Tokyo-based startup, has been successful as a production company of computerized music for animation, manga, films, virtual realities and games that uses so-called Vocaloid artists. The synthesized singers or musical acts known as Vocaloid are often paired up with anime- or manga- style characters.

Like Yonekura's digital clone, Vocaloids are an example of Japanese technology that uses computer software to duplicate human traits or likeness.

Among INCS toenter's hits is "Melt," created on a single desktop in 2007 and performed by a group called Supercell, which has been played 23 million times on YouTube.

A more recent hit is "Kawaikute gomen," which means "Sorry for being so cute," by HoneyWorks,

a vocaloid unit. Another is Eve, who performs the theme song of megahit animation series "Jujutsu Kaisen," and has 4.6 million subscribers on his YouTube channel.

Some wonder whether digital clones or Vocaloids could become popular outside Japan. Digital assistant and voice software, as well as computerized music exist in the West, but they are not clones or Vocaloids.

Yu Tamura, chief executive and founder of INCS toenter, says he is encouraged by the increasing global popularity of Japanese animation and manga but that one thing to watch out for is the "Galapagos syndrome."

The term, referring to the isolated Pacific islands where animals evolved in unique ways, is widely used in Japan to describe how some Japanese products, while successful at home, fail to translate abroad.

Overseas consumers could see it as quirky or too cutesy, except for Japanophiles, Tamura said.

"They simply won't get it," he said.

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EUROPE'S SWEEPING RULES FOR TECH GIANTS ARE ABOUT TO KICK IN. HERE'S HOW THEY WORK

Google, Facebook, TikTok and other Big Tech companies operating in Europe are facing one of the most far-reaching efforts to clean up what people encounter online.

The first phase of the European Union's groundbreaking new digital rules will take effect this week. The Digital Services Act is part of a suite of tech-focused regulations crafted by the 27-nation bloc — long a global leader in cracking down on tech giants.

The DSA, which the biggest platforms must start following, is designed to keep users safe online and stop the spread of harmful content that's either illegal or violates a platform's terms of service, such as promotion of genocide or anorexia. It also looks to protect Europeans' fundamental rights like privacy and free speech.

Some online platforms, which could face billions in fines if they don't comply, have already started making changes.

Here's a look at what's happening this week:

WHICH PLATFORMS ARE AFFECTED?

So far, 19. They include eight social media platforms: Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Snapchat.

There are five online marketplaces: Amazon, Booking.com, China's Alibaba AliExpress and Germany's Zalando.

Mobile app stores Google Play and Apple's App Store are subject, as are Google's Search and Microsoft's Bing search engine.

Google Maps and Wikipedia round out the list.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER ONLINE COMPANIES?

The EU's list is based on numbers submitted by the platforms. Those with 45 million or more users — or 10% of the EU's population — will face the DSA's highest level of regulation.

Brussels insiders, however, have pointed to some notable omissions from the EU's list, like eBay, Airbnb, Netflix and even PornHub. The list isn't definitive, and it's possible other platforms may be added later on.

Any business providing digital services to Europeans will eventually have to comply with the DSA. They will face fewer obligations than the biggest platforms, however, and have another six months before they must fall in line.

Citing uncertainty over the new rules, Facebook and Instagram parent Meta Platforms has held off launching its Twitter rival, Threads, in the EU.

WHAT'S CHANGING?

Platforms have started rolling out new ways for European users to flag illegal online content and dodgy products, which companies will be obligated to take down quickly and objectively.

The DSA "will have a significant impact on the experiences Europeans have when they open their phones or fire up their laptops," Nick Clegg, Meta's president for global affairs, said in a blog post.

Meta's existing tools to report illegal or rule-breaking content will be easier to access, Clegg said.

Amazon opened a new channel for reporting suspected illegal products and is providing more information about third-party merchants.

TikTok gave users an "additional reporting option" for content, including advertising, that they believe is illegal. Categories such as hate speech and harassment, suicide and self-harm, misinformation or frauds and scams, will help them pinpoint the problem.

Then, a "new dedicated team of moderators and legal specialists" will determine whether flagged content either violates its policies or is unlawful and should be taken down, according to the app from Chinese parent company ByteDance.

TikTok says the reason for a takedown will explained to the person who posted the material and the one who flagged it, and decisions can be appealed.

TikTok users can turn off systems that recommend videos and posts based on what a user has previously viewed. Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat users will have similar options. Such systems have been blamed for leading social media users to increasingly extreme posts.

The DSA prohibits targeting vulnerable categories of people, including children, with ads.

Snapchat said advertisers won't be able to use personalization and optimization tools for teens in the EU and U.K. Snapchat users who are 18 and older also would get more transparency and control over ads they see, including "details and insight" on why they're shown specific ads.

TikTok made similar changes, stopping users 13 to 17 from getting personalized ads "based on their activities on or off TikTok."

IS THERE PUSHBACK?

Zalando, a German online fashion retailer, has filed a legal challenge over its inclusion on the DSA's list of the largest online platforms, arguing that it's being treated unfairly.

Nevertheless, Zalando is launching content flagging systems for its website even though there's little risk of illegal material showing up among its highly curated collection of clothes, bags and shoes.

The company has supported the DSA, said Aurelie Caulier, Zalando's head of public affairs for the EU.

"It will bring loads of positive changes" for consumers, she said. But "generally, Zalando doesn't have systemic risk (that other platforms pose). So that's why we don't think we fit in that category."

Amazon has filed a similar case with a top EU court.

WHAT HAPPENS IF COMPANIES DON'T FOLLOW THE RULES?

Officials have warned tech companies that violations could bring fines worth up to 6% of their global revenue — which could amount to billions — or even a ban from the EU. But don't expect penalties to come right away for individual breaches, such as failing to take down a specific video promoting hate speech.

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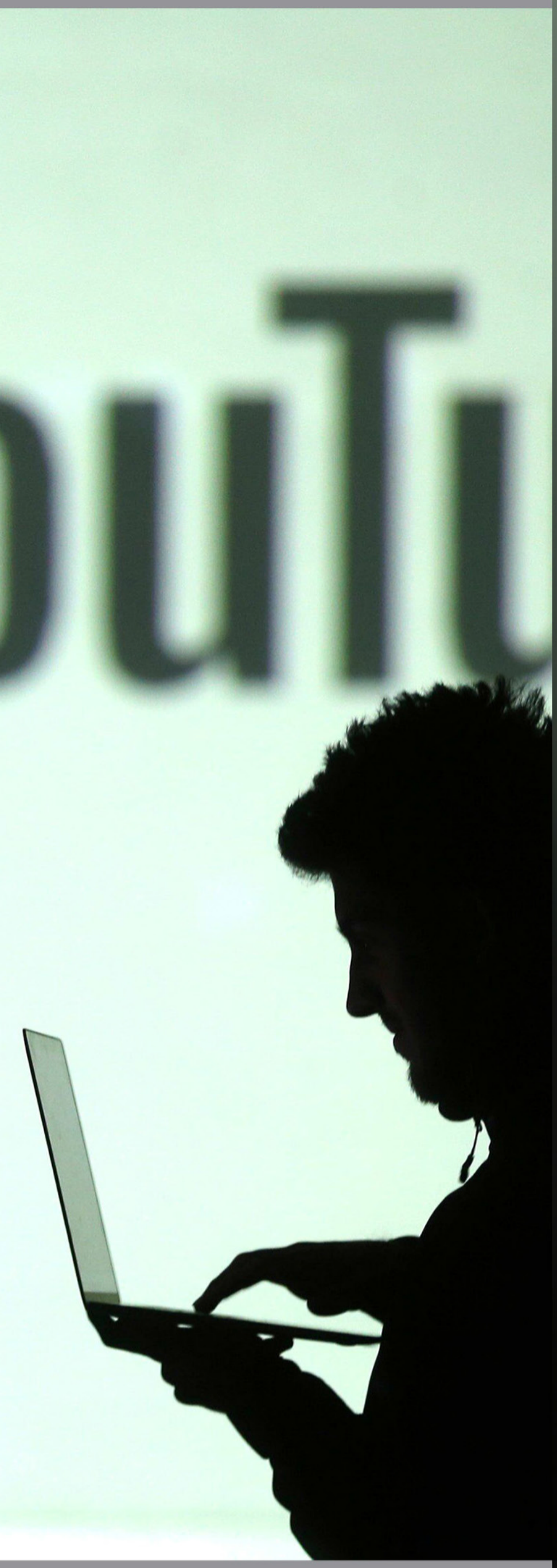

Instead, the DSA is more about whether tech companies have the right processes in place to reduce the harm that their algorithm-based recommendation systems can inflict on users. Essentially, they'll have to let the European Commission, the EU's executive arm and top digital enforcer, look under the hood to see how their algorithms work.

EU officials "are concerned with user behavior on the one hand, like bullying and spreading illegal content, but they're also concerned about the way that platforms work and how they contribute to the negative effects," said Sally Broughton Micova, an associate professor at the University of East Anglia.

That includes looking at how the platforms work with digital advertising systems, which could be used to profile users for harmful material like disinformation, or how their livestreaming systems function, which could be used to instantly spread terrorist content, said Broughton Micova, who's also academic co-director at the Centre on Regulation in Europe, a Brussels-based think tank.

Big platforms have to identify and assess potential systemic risks and whether they're doing enough to reduce them. These risk assessments are due by the end of August and then they will be independently audited.

The audits are expected to be the main tool to verify compliance — though the EU's plan has faced criticism for lacking details that leave it unclear how the process will work.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD?

Europe's changes could have global impact. Wikipedia is tweaking some policies and modifying its terms of use to provide more information on "problematic users and content." Those alterations won't be limited to Europe and "will be implemented globally," said the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation, which hosts the community-powered encyclopedia.

"The rules and processes that govern Wikimedia projects worldwide, including any changes in response to the DSA, are as universal as possible," it said in a statement.

Snapchat said its new reporting and appeal process for flagging illegal content or accounts that break its rules will be rolled out first in the EU and then globally in the coming months.

It's going to be hard for tech companies to limit DSA-related changes, said Broughton Micova, adding that digital ad networks aren't isolated to Europe and that social media influencers can have global reach.

The regulations are "dealing with multichannel networks that operate globally. So there is going to be a ripple effect once you have kind of mitigations that get taken into place," she said.

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GM'S CRUISE AUTONOMOUS VEHICLE UNIT AGREES TO CUT FLEET IN HALF AFTER 2 CRASHES IN SAN FRANCISCO

General Motors' Cruise autonomous vehicle unit has agreed to cut its fleet of San Francisco robotaxis in half as authorities investigate two recent crashes in the city.

The state Department of Motor Vehicles asked for the reduction after a Cruise vehicle without a human driver collided with an unspecified emergency vehicle last week.

"The DMV is investigating recent concerning incidents involving Cruise vehicles in San Francisco," the DMV said last weekend in a statement. "Cruise has agreed to a 50% reduction

and will have no more than 50 driverless vehicles in operation during the day and 150 driverless vehicles in operation at night."

The development comes just over a week after California regulators allowed Cruise and Google spinoff Waymo to operate autonomous robotaxis throughout San Francisco at all hours, despite safety worries spurred by recurring problems with unexpected stops and other erratic behavior.

The decision Aug. 10 by the Public Utilities Commission made San Francisco the first major U.S. city with two fleets of driverless vehicles competing for passengers.

The Cruise vehicle had a green light, entered an intersection, and was hit by the emergency vehicle responding to a call, the San Francisco Chronicle reported, based on tweets from Cruise.

The robotaxi was carrying a passenger, who was taken by ambulance to a hospital with injuries that were not severe, Cruise told the newspaper.

Also last week, a Cruise car without a passenger collided with another vehicle in San Francisco, the newspaper reported.

The San Francisco Fire Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the newspaper.

The robotaxi almost immediately identified the emergency response vehicle as it came into view, Greg Dietrerich, Cruise's general manager in San Francisco, said in a statement on the company website.

At the intersection, visibility is occluded by buildings, and it's not possible to see objects around a corner until they are very close to the intersection, Dietrerich's statement said. The Cruise

autonomous vehicle detected the siren as soon it was distinguishable from background noise, he wrote.

"The AV's ability to successfully chart the emergency vehicle's path was complicated by the fact that the emergency vehicle was in the oncoming lane of traffic, which it had moved into to bypass the red light," Dietrerich wrote.

The Cruise vehicle identified the risk of a crash and braked, reducing its speed, but couldn't avoid the collision, he wrote.

Cruise vehicles have driven more than 3 million autonomous miles in the city and have interacted with emergency vehicles more than 168,000 times in the first seven months of this year alone, the statement said. "We realize that we'll always encounter challenging situations, which is why continuous improvement is central to our work."

The company will work with regulators and city departments to reduce the likelihood of a crash happening again, Dietrerich wrote.

The DMV said the fleet reduction will remain until its investigation ends and Cruise takes corrective action to improve safety. "The DMV reserves the right, following investigation of the facts, to suspend or revoke testing and/or deployment permits if there is determined to be an unreasonable risk to public safety."

cruise
SF COVID-19
DELIVERY
RESPONSE

WHITE HOUSE SCIENCE ADVISER CALLS FOR MORE SAFEGUARDS AGAINST ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RISKS

Image: Oleg Albinsky

When President Joe Biden has questions about artificial intelligence, one expert he turns to is his science adviser Arati Prabhakar, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Prabhakar is helping to guide the U.S. approach to safeguarding AI technology, relying in part on cooperation from big American tech firms like Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Meta.

The India-born, Texas-raised engineer and applied physicist is coming at the problem from a career bridging work in government — including leading the Defense Department's advanced technology research arm — and the private sector as a former Silicon Valley executive and venture capitalist.

She spoke earlier this month ahead of a White House-organized test of AI systems at the DefCon hacker convention in Las Vegas. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Does the president come to ask you about AI?

A: I've had the great privilege of talking with him several times about artificial intelligence. Those are great conversations because he's laser-focused on understanding what it is and how people are using it. Then immediately he just goes to the consequences and deep implications. Those have been some very good conversations. Very exploratory, but also very focused on action.

Q: Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (who's pushing for AI regulations) says making AI models explainable is a priority. How realistic is that?

Image: Justin Sullivan

A: It's a technical feature of these deep-learning, machine-learning systems, that they are opaque. They are black box in nature. But most of the risks we deal with as human beings come from things that are not explainable. As an example, I take a medicine every single day. While I can't actually predict exactly how it's going to interact with the cells in my body, we have found ways to make pharmaceuticals safe enough. Think about drugs before we had clinical trials. You could hawk some powder or syrup and it might make you better or it might kill you. But when we have clinical trials and a process in place, we started having the technical means to know enough to start harnessing the value of pharmaceuticals. This is the journey we have to be on now for artificial intelligence. We're not going to have perfect measures, but I think we can get to the point where we know enough about the safety and effectiveness of these systems to really use them and to get the value that they can offer.

Q: What are some specific AI applications you're concerned about?

A: Some of the things we see are big and obvious. If you break the guardrails of a chatbot, which people do routinely, and coax it to tell you how to build a weapon, well, clearly that's concerning. Some of the harms are much more subtle. When these systems are trained off human data, they sometimes distill the bias that's in that data. There's now a fairly substantial, distressing history of facial recognition systems being used inappropriately and leading to wrongful arrests of Black people. And then privacy concerns. All of our data that's out in the world, each individual piece may not

Image: Nathan Howard

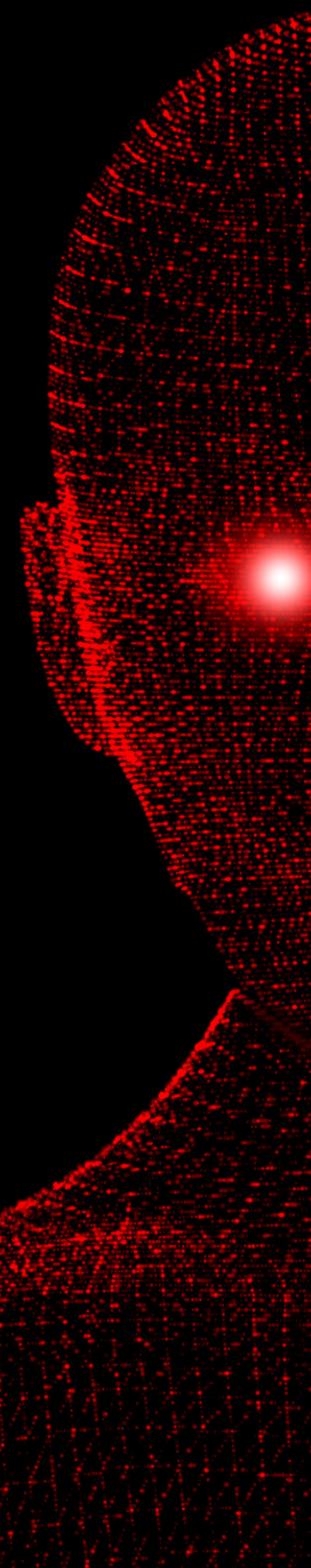
reveal much about us, but when you put it all together it tells you rather a lot about each of us.

Q: Seven companies (including Google, Microsoft and ChatGPT-maker OpenAI) agreed in July to meet voluntary AI safety standards set by the White House. Were any of those commitments harder to get? Where's the friction?

A: I want to start by just acknowledging how fortunate we are that so many of the companies that are driving AI technology today are American companies. It reflects a long history of valuing innovation in this country. That's a tremendous advantage. We also just have to be very, very clear that with every good intention in the world, the realities of operating in the market are, by definition, a constraint on how far these individual companies can go. We hope many more will join them and voluntary commitments will grow. We just have to be clear that's only one part of it. That's companies stepping up to their responsibilities. But we in government need to step up to ours, both in the executive branch and for the legislative branch.

Q: Do you have a timeline for future actions (such as a planned Biden executive order)? Will it include enforceable accountability measures for AI developers?

A: Many measures are under consideration. I don't have a timeline for you. I will just say fast. And that comes directly from the top. The president has been clear that this is an urgent issue.



CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES ASK FTC TO INVESTIGATE GOOGLE FOR TARGETING ADS TO KIDS

UNITED STATES
FEDERAL
TRADE
COMMISSION
BUILDING

Children's advocacy groups including Fairplay and Common Sense Media are asking the Federal Trade Commission to investigate Google, saying the tech giant serves personalized ads to kids on YouTube despite federal law prohibiting the practice.

The letter follows a report from The New York Times last week that found that ads on YouTube may have led to the online tracking of children. The federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA, requires kid-oriented websites to get parents' consent before collecting personal information of children under 13.

In response to the Times report, Google said last week that it did not run personalized ads on children's videos and that its ad practices fully complied with COPPA. When ads appear on children's videos, the company told the Times, they are based on webpage content, not targeted to user profiles.

But Wednesday's letter to the FTC — also signed by the nonprofit Center for Digital Democracy — says Fairplay, as well as independent ad buyers, conducted follow-up research suggesting that the ads are, in fact, personalized. They did this by running test ad campaigns on YouTube, selecting series of users of attributes and affinities for ad targeting and instructed Google to only run the ads on "made for kids" channels.

In theory, the groups say, these test campaigns should have resulted in zero placements, because under Google and YouTube's policy, no personalized ads are supposed to run on "made for kids" videos. But Fairplay says its targeted $10 ad campaign resulted in over 1,400 impressions

You Tube

on "made for kids" channels and the ad buyers reported similar results.

Google said the report's conclusions "point to a fundamental misunderstanding of how advertising works on made for kids content."

"We do not allow ads personalization on made for kids content and we do not allow advertisers to target children with ads across any of our products," the company said in a statement. "We also do not offer advertisers the option to directly target made for kids content as a whole. Given the allegations, we wish the author of the report had contacted us first."

Its parent company, Alphabet, agreed in 2019 to pay $170 million to settle allegations that YouTube collected personal data on children without their parents' consent.

In response, the company agreed to work with video creators to label material aimed at kids and said it will limit data collection when users view such videos, regardless of their age.

"If Google's representations to its advertisers are accurate, it is violating COPPA," said Josh Golin, executive director of Fairplay, in a statement. "The FTC must launch an immediate and comprehensive investigation and use its subpoena authority to better understand Google's black box child-directed ad targeting."

INDIA LANDS A SPACECRAFT NEAR THE MOON'S SOUTH POLE, A FIRST FOR THE WORLD AS IT JOINS ELITE CLUB

India became the first country to land a spacecraft near the moon's south pole on Wednesday — a historic voyage to uncharted territory that scientists believe could hold vital reserves of frozen water, and a technological triumph for the world's most populous nation.

A lander with a rover inside touched down on the lunar surface at 6:04 p.m. local time, sparking celebrations around India, including in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru, where space

INFINITY
2K22

scientists watching the landing erupted in cheers and applause. After a failed attempt in 2019, India now joins the United States, the Soviet Union and China in reaching this milestone.

The successful moon mission showcases India's rising standing as a technology and space powerhouse and dovetails with the image of the country that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trying to project: an ascendant country asserting its place among the global elite.

"India is now on the moon. India has reached the south pole of the moon — no other country has achieved that. We are witnessing history," Modi said as he waved the Indian tri-colored flag while watching the historic landing from South Africa, where he is participating in the BRICS nations summit.

The lunar rover will slide down a flap from the lander within hours or a day and conduct experiments, including an analysis of the mineral composition of the lunar surface, said S. Somnath, chairman of the state-run Indian Space Research Organization.

Somnath said the mission is expected to last two weeks, and that India would next attempt a manned lunar mission.

Nuclear-armed India grew to become the world's fifth-largest economy last year, and the success of the lunar mission will likely help Modi's popularity ahead of a crucial general election next year.

India's successful landing comes just days after Russia's Luna-25, which was aiming for the same lunar region, spun into an uncontrolled orbit and crashed. It would have been the first successful Russian lunar landing after a gap of

47 years. Russia's head of the state-controlled space corporation Roscosmos attributed the failure to the lack of expertise due to the long break in lunar research that followed the last Soviet mission to the moon in 1976.

Excited and anxious, people across India, home to the world's largest population, crowded around televisions in offices, shops, restaurants and homes. Thousands prayed Tuesday for the success of the mission with oil lamps on the river banks, temples and religious places, including the holy city of Varanasi in northern India.

Dozens of people in a government-run planetarium started praying with folded hands as the lander approached the lunar surface for landing. They switched to cheering and clapping as the touch down happened.

A man waved a banner reading "The Moon in India's arms."

Shrini Singh, a New Delhi resident, said she got goosebumps. "It's a very happy moment ... you can see the energy. It's beyond words."

Mitakshi Sinha, a student, said the space agency's success motivated her. "And now I also want to be part of ISRO."

After the landing, congratulations poured in from around the world, cementing India's emergence as a modern space power.

"Your success will power the imagination and light the future of people around the world," the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"Incredible!" European Space Agency's director

INDIA TODAY
NEWS NATION

general Josef Aschbacher tweeted. "I am thoroughly impressed."

NASA's former science mission chief, Thomas Zurbuchen, who now works at ETH Zurich, a public research university in Switzerland where he is leading its space initiative, said he felt proud of the achievement.

India's Chandrayaan-3 — "moon craft" in Sanskrit — took off from a launchpad in Sriharikota in southern India on July 14. Its landing marks a significant step forward for the nation's progress in space exploration, the Indian Space Research Organization said in a statement earlier.

Many countries and private companies are interested in the south pole region because permanently shadowed craters may hold frozen water that could help future astronaut missions.

The six-wheeled lander and rover module of Chandrayaan-3 is configured with payloads that would provide data to the scientific community on the properties of lunar soil and rocks, including chemical and elemental compositions.

India's previous attempt to land a robotic spacecraft near the moon's little-explored south pole ended in failure in 2019. It entered the lunar orbit but lost touch with its lander, which crashed while making its final descent to deploy a rover to search for signs of water. According to a failure analysis report submitted to the ISRO, the crash was caused by a software glitch.

The $140-million mission in 2019 was intended to study permanently shadowed moon craters that are thought to contain water deposits and were confirmed by India's Chandrayaan-1 orbiter mission in 2008.

The anticipation for a successful landing rose after Russia's failed attempt and as India's regional rival China reaches for new milestones in space. In May, China launched a three-person crew for its orbiting space station and hopes to put astronauts on the moon before the end of the decade. Relations between India and China have plunged since deadly border clashes in 2020.

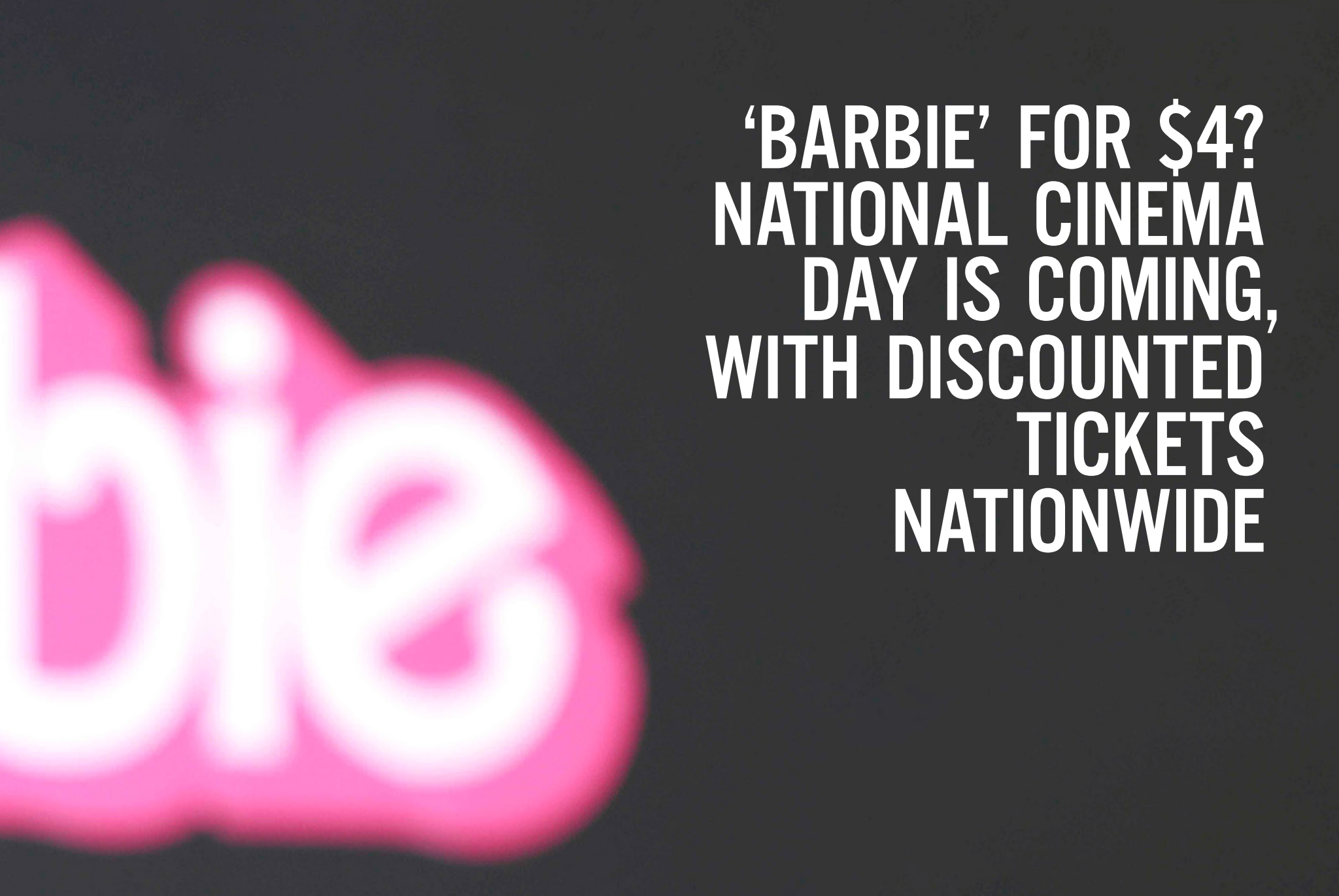
Numerous countries and private companies are racing to successfully land a spacecraft on the lunar surface. In April, a Japanese company's spacecraft apparently crashed while attempting to land on the moon. An Israeli nonprofit tried to achieve a similar feat in 2019, but its spacecraft was destroyed on impact.

Japan plans to launch a lunar lander to the moon over the weekend as part of an X-ray telescope mission, and two U.S. companies also are vying to put landers on the moon by the end of the year, one of them at the south pole. In the coming years, NASA plans to land astronauts at the lunar south pole, taking advantage of the frozen water in craters.

Pallava Bagla, a science writer and co-author of books on India's space exploration, said the Russian failure days earlier did not put India off. He also said lessons learned from India's failed mission four years ago were incorporated and a flawless mission was executed on Wednesday.

"Indians didn't get derailed. They continued the journey with strength and confidence that paid off," he said.

Image: Hanna Lassen



‘BARBIE’ FOR $4? NATIONAL CINEMA DAY IS COMING, WITH DISCOUNTED TICKETS NATIONWIDE

Still haven't seen "Barbie" or "Oppenheimer"? This Sunday, you'll be able to catch up for $4 a ticket in movie theaters nationwide.

Theater owners announced Monday that the second annual National Cinema Day will be held Sunday, Aug. 27. For one day, all movies — in all formats and at all showtimes — will be $4 at participating theaters. More than 3,000 theaters are participating, which accounts for most of the cinemas in the U.S., including the leading chains AMC and Regal.

It's the second straight year theaters are trotting out the one-day event at the tail end of summer. Last year's inaugural National Cinema Day, put on by the Cinema Foundation, a nonprofit affiliate of the National Association of Theater Owners, was judged an enormous success. An estimated 8.1 million moviegoers bought $3 tickets on Saturday, Sept. 3. The average movie ticket in 2022, according to NATO, cost $10.53.

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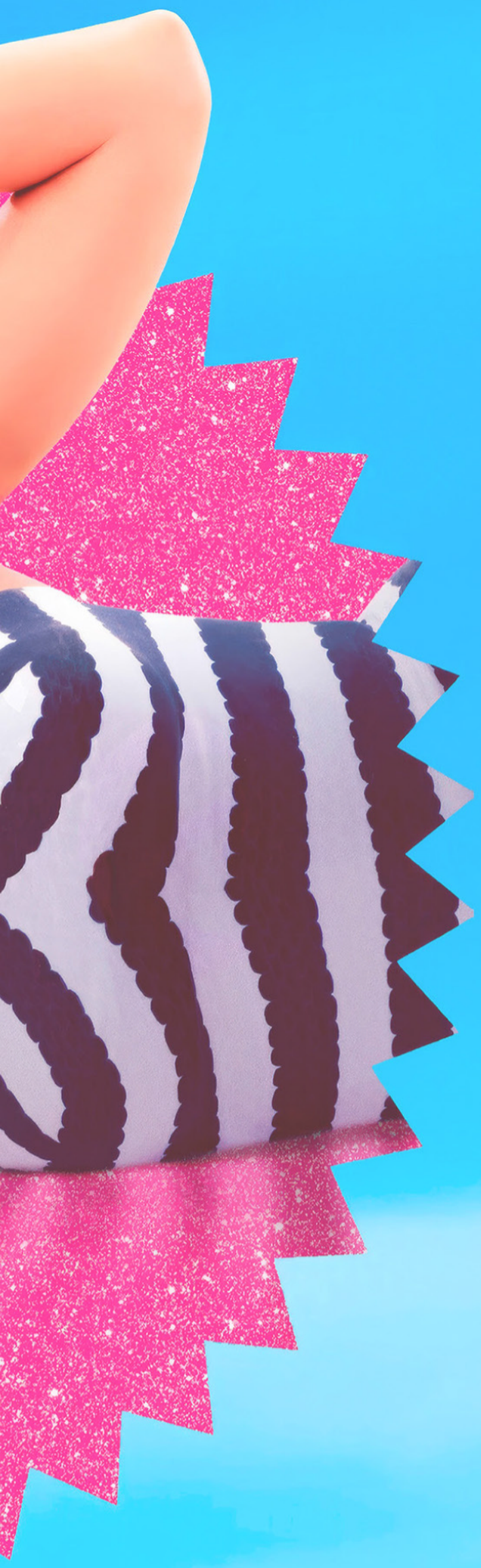

The discount gimmick turned into the highest attended day of the year for theaters. A normally quiet time instead saw cinemas crowded with moviegoers — and theaters sold plenty of popcorn. This year, the day is moving up slightly on the calendar, shifting from Saturday to Sunday, and costs $1 more.

But thanks to remarkably sustained interest in "Barbie," as well as in "Oppenheimer," the August box office has been booming. The summer box office is up to $3.8 billion in ticket sales through Sunday, according to data firm Comscore — about 16.6% ahead of 2022 at the same point.

While last year's Cinema Day had fairly paltry offerings ("Top Gun: Maverick" was the top draw, more than two months after it opened), this year's will feature "Barbie" in its fifth week. Greta Gerwig's record-breaking film has made $1.28 billion worldwide. There's also Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer" ($717.8 million globally), the second week of the DC Comics film "Blue Beetle" and new releases "Gran Turismo," "Golda," "Bottoms" and "Retribution."

The event is also a way for studios to sell audiences on their fall lineups. A sneak peek of anticipated autumn releases will play before each screening.

BUSINESS TYCOON CARLOS GHOSN'S RISE, FALL AND DRAMATIC ESCAPE IS SUBJECT OF NEW APPLE TV+ SERIES

Carlos Ghosn, the former rock star businessman who fell from grace and fled authorities smuggled in a music instrument box, is getting what his dramatic story deserves — a multi-part documentary series.

"Wanted: The Escape of Carlos Ghosn" is the juicy real tale of how the auto executive went from attending red carpets as the head of both Nissan and Renault to fleeing to Lebanon with the help of a former Green Beret.

"The Carlos Ghosn story is unbelievable in the sense that it's a Shakespearean tragedy in which we have an archetypal tragic hero who everybody wants to root for but knows the train crash is coming," said Sean McLain, a consulting producer on the Apple TV+ series and Wall Street Journal reporter.

The four-part series takes a wider lens to Ghosn's story, tracing the childhood and rise of the auto executive which Time magazine once put ahead of Bill Gates among the 15 most influential global business executives.

Voices included are Louis Schweitzer, former CEO of Renault; Andy Palmer, former COO of Nissan; Arnaud Montebourg, former French minister of economy; Takashi Yamashita, former Japanese minister of justice; and Hiroto Saikawa, former Nissan CEO.

Most crucially, director James Jones went to Lebanon and sat down with Ghosn and his wife, Carole, on camera. Jones got the job before he'd secured access to the couple but knew he had to have them participate.

"You need to hear from the people in the room. You can't just have pundits commentating on what happened or kind of rehashing the story second-hand," Jones says. "For me, getting Carlos and Carole Ghosn to talk frankly was a huge thing and I think that the series would have been a struggle to make without that."

Many viewers may tune in because of the brazen way Ghosn left Japan in 2019 after being accused of financial improprieties. He turned to Mike Taylor, a former Green Beret, who hid the executive in a large music instrument box — with breathing holes drilled in — and got him out on a private jet.

"My initial reaction was like, 'Is there enough for four parts?' I know he's an interesting guy who is a brilliant businessman, and the escape is thrilling," said Jones. "But then when I spent the time reading up about it, it did feel rich and the kind of thing that's quite satisfying to really get your teeth into."

The Brazilian-born Ghosn took refuge in Lebanon, his ancestral homeland, which has no extradition treaty with Japan. He denied the financial improprieties charges and said Japan's justice system was unfair. "I did not escape justice. I fled injustice," he said at the time.

The series also investigates Japan's legal system, which critics say amounts to "hostage justice," allowing suspects to be questioned for days without a lawyer present while they are kept in solitary confinement in a small, spartan cell. The conviction rate of over 99% has raised questions over forced confessions.

The case against Ghosn centers on elaborate calculations to compensate him after retirement for a pay cut he took beginning in 2009, when disclosure of big executive pay became a legal requirement in Japan.

Ghosn argues the case against him was concocted in a power struggle within Nissan's boardroom and the series does show a conspiracy by Nissan officials to get rid of Ghosn because they feared a merger with Renault.

"He was wronged and yet these allegations look very bad," said Jones. "And by hiding out in Lebanon, he's not helping the appearance of innocence."

Ghosn may have escaped but not everyone who helped him did the same. Taylor was sentenced

to two years in prison, while his son, Peter, was sentenced to one year and eight months for his part. They claim in the series that Ghosn never paid them for their work helping him escape.

Jones sees the Ghosn saga as a cautionary tale of a leader who lost his bearings. The executive may have believed that because he'd saved Nissan and Renault that he deserved extra compensation.

"He thought he had saved these companies from extinction and made them successful and made them in his own image and therefore was kind of entitled to play by his own rules to some extent," he said.

McLain, whose book with fellow Wall Street Journal reporter Nick Kostov "Boundless" informed the series, said Ghosn's fall illustrates the need for checks and balances in the C-suite.

"He was going to retire a very wealthy man, but because he wanted more, what he's going to be known for from now on is spiriting himself away from Japan by hiding in a box."

‘GRAN TURISMO’ MOVIE DRIFTS INTO CLICHES AND VIDEO GAME AESTHETICS

GRAN TURISMO - Official Trailer 2

GRAN TURISMO - Official Trailer

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In 2006, a Nissan marketing executive had a truly insane idea to create a competition and an "academy" to turn gamers into race car drivers. Darren Cox saw an untapped market of potential car-buyers in Gran Turismo enthusiasts – the popular PlayStation racing simulator that first came on the market in 1997. And in the third year of the "GT Academy," an actual star emerged in a 19-year-old British kid named Jann Mardenborough, who would go on to become a professional driver, just like he dreamed.

It's a fine and lucrative idea for a movie — an inspirational underdog story in which brands like Nissan and PlayStation, a Sony company which also owns the studio behind the movie, can take partial credit for and help underwrite. And it couldn't come at a better time, when F1 is exploding in popularity in the United States thanks in part to the Netflix series "Drive to Survive." But "Gran Turismo" has taken this opportunity and made the cliché version in this year of movies like "Barbie" and "Air," which showed audiences that "brand" movies don't have to be basic. They can be fresh, vibrant, funny and entertaining – even when literally focused on the corporate schlubs just trying to earn their keep.

If you don't know ins and outs of Mardenborough's story, it's best not to study up before "Gran Turismo." The movie, which has gone through several writers and directors over the years it's been in development, takes immense liberties with its true story and cherry picks things from various points in Mardenborough's career to make his debut year as dramatic as possible. The version coming to theaters is credited to screenwriters Jason Hall and Zach Baylin and director Neill Blomkamp ("District 9,""Chappie"),

GRAN TURISMO Vignette - The True Story

who likes to amp up the excitement of a car going 200 miles an hour with lots of cuts and close-ups and aerial shots that would surely drive the down-and-out veteran enlisted to train these amateurs absolutely insane.

That veteran, named Jack Salter, is played by David Harbour, who is quite enjoyable in a pretty cliché "tough love mentor with a past" role. He brings life and energy and an amusing voice of reason to this unbelievable story which can't seem to choose a lane.

The first hour leans heavily into the brand mythologizing as it sets everything up and it is dreadful. It's almost in spite of everything that the second half, which focuses on the actual racing, is more successful. How could it not be? It's a very pleasing underdog makes good journey, with a very pleasant and empathetic lead actor in Archie Madekwe.

His parents, played by Djimon Hounsou and former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell-Horner, are also appealing, if underused and trotted out only for maximum emotional impact. We could have used a little more of the Mardenborough clan and a little less of Jann's love interest, Audrey (Maeve Courtier-Lilley) who is introduced to another peripheral female character in a 5-second scene that is so out of nowhere and random that I wondered if it was only there so that the very male film could technically pass the Bechdel Test.

Poor Orlando Bloom gets a little lost in everything as the high-anxiety Nissan marketing executive Danny Moore, who is frustratingly underdrawn and who the movie goes through great pains to avoid making the enemy. That goes to the cocky, model-y young driver who is there to represent

GRAN TURISMO – Exclusive Sneak Peek

NordicTrack

the big money side of European racing, in his gold car branded by Moët & Chandon. Instead, Bloom is kind of just a tour guide to the high life, uttering lines like "ever been on a private jet before?" to the kid from Cardiff. But most egregious is the depiction of the Japanese Nissan executives, who are essentially nameless, characterless background actors in suits called on to either nod or look vaguely confused as Danny tries to reassure them that these amateur drivers won't die.

The movie on the page wants to romanticize the simple pleasures of race car driving outside of the glitz and glamour of the high-rolling industry, and has been directed by someone who doesn't actually believe that the driving is enough and that it does need all the trimmings of a "Fast and Furious" spinoff to make it exciting to an audience. It's the MTV cut of Winona Ryder's documentary from "Reality Bites," the one the slick marketing guy would make. And I think therein lies the essential incongruity of what amounts to a moderately entertaining, very long Super Bowl spot quality commercial for PlayStation and Nissan.

"Gran Turismo," a Sony Pictures release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for "intense action and some strong language." Running time: 135 minutes. Two stars out of four.

MPA Definition of PG-13: Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

NISSAN
nismo

facebook
What's

CANADA WILDFIRE EVACUEES CAN'T GET NEWS MEDIA ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM. SOME FIND WORKAROUNDS

Before fleeing about 900 miles (1,500 kilometers) south of Yellowknife by car, Agnes Grandejambe looked to social media to find out almost everything she needed to know about escaping the encroaching wildfires.

Some from official government accounts. Mostly from friends and family, including an offer of help from her First Nation band.

But not from news media sites.

That's because Canadian news outlets — including the only one she trusts — have been blocked on Facebook and Instagram as a result of a dispute with the national government.

"People were posting how close the fires were. And we knew the highway kept opening and closing, so we said, 'OK, we'll just go,'" said the 65-year-old who is a longtime resident of the capital city of Canada's Northwest Territories.

Her preferred media site, Yellowknife-based Cabin Radio, has been doing its best to get around the ban with help from the station's audience members who have been taking news from the Cabin Radio website — filled with the latest details — then snapping a screenshot and sharing that image on Facebook and Instagram so that their friends, family and others are more likely to see the information.

"Our audience did an incredible job of undermining that ban on our behalf," said Ollie Williams, editor of Cabin Radio, speaking by phone after relocating west of Yellowknife to Fort Simpson. "They found workarounds and they got our coverage out to each other, regardless of Meta trying to keep that from happening."

Facebook
Instagram

For their part, reporters have been gathering news and talking to first responders from their cars while themselves having to evacuate. Williams has been using a device for satellite internet service. And the station's general manager is sharing news with his team while volunteering as a bus driver carrying evacuees to the airport.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, announced earlier this month it would keep its promise to block news content in Canada on its platforms — everything from local outlets like Cabin Radio to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation — in response to a new law that requires tech giants to pay publishers for linking to or otherwise repurposing their content online.

Meta stood by its decision, pointing out in a statement issued about the wildfires that people in Canada can continue to use the apps "to connect with their communities and access reputable information, including content from official government agencies, emergency services and non-governmental organizations."

A government minister called on Meta to lift the ban on news media.

"What Meta is doing is totally unacceptable," said Transport Minister Pablo Rodriguez on a call with reporters. "I warned them during conversations in the past of the risk of blocking news."

"I'm asking to go back on their decision and allow people to have access to news and information in Canada," he said.

Meta has been alone in its action. Google's owner Alphabet has also said it plans to remove news links in protest of the new law,

although it hasn't yet followed through. The Online News Act, passed in late June after lengthy debate, doesn't take effect until later this year.

"Meta has preemptively installed a ban that is now having dangerous consequences," Williams said. The editor said he doesn't put all of the blame on Meta for its arguments with the Canadian government, but local outlets like his had no say in that dispute and how it's governed.

"More importantly, nobody asked our audience," Williams said. "So the people being affected by this and the people producing the coverage, trying to help, had no voice at any part in that process. The outcome is a stupid and dangerous ban."

Samuel Woolley, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Journalism and Media, warns that Meta's blocking of news runs the risk of misinformation taking the place of trusted and vetted content during a natural disaster, at a risk of people's lives.

For years, platforms like Facebook pushed journalists to rely on the platform while profiting from news sharing, he said. But now they are trying to recreate themselves as news-free platforms to get away from some of the responsibility of compensating journalists or being treated as a media entity.

Woolley adds that the loss of reliable news won't be felt equally. Marginalized communities, people of color and low-income families — who may rely on social media for information when they can't afford a

newspaper subscription, for example — will be impacted the most.

It was when Grandejambe decided to leave Yellowknife, packing two vehicles along with four of her adult children and her teenage grandson. She was offered assistance and advice from fellow members of the Behdzi Ahda First Nation, based in the Artic community of Colville Lake where she was born.

An official evacuation order came soon after. But it hasn't always been clear where to go and what to do.

She spoke by phone from a motel in Edmonton, Alberta, after a long journey that included an hours-long wait for gas near Fort Providence — a problem that's been thoroughly covered by Cabin Radio.

Her family was still working to get registered at Edmonton's Expo convention center that has opened up to evacuees from the Northwest Territories. While annoyed by the difficulty of getting good information and what she felt was poor planning by government authorities ahead of the evacuation order, Grandejambe said she was happy her family was safe.

"They're good. Just calm, cool," she said. "They've been taught since they were small, don't stress over something that's not in our control."

MICROSOFT BUDGES ON VIDEO GAME STREAMING RIGHTS IN PUSH FOR UK TO APPROVE ACTIVISION BLIZZARD DEAL

270
ACTIVISION

British competition regulators opened a new investigation into Microsoft's revamped bid to buy video game maker Activision Blizzard, representing the last major hurdle to closing one of the biggest deals in tech history.

The Competition and Markets Authority said it has until Oct. 18 to decide whether to approve the deal or escalate its preliminary investigation into an in-depth review. The companies agreed earlier to extend the transaction's deadline to that same date.

Xbox maker Microsoft has been on a quest to acquire Activision, maker of the popular Call of Duty game franchise since announcing the $69 billion deal in January 2022.

The companies have secured approvals from antitrust authorities covering 40 countries, including the European Union.

The blockbuster deal faced pushback in the United States, but the Federal Trade Commission lost a court fight to stop it, effectively clearing the way for it to proceed.

The purchase is now only held up in Britain, where authorities moved to block it earlier this year over worries about competition being stifled in the emerging cloud gaming market, where players can avoid buying pricey consoles and stream games to their tablets or phones.

Under the restructured deal, Microsoft will sell cloud streaming rights outside of the European Economic Area for all current and new Activision games released over the next 15 years to French game studio Ubisoft Entertainment, Microsoft President Brad Smith said in a blog post. The European Economic Area includes the EU's 27 nations, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.

crosoft

VISION
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Activision CEO Bobby Kotick said in a blog post that "nothing substantially changes" by selling off the streaming rights.

In an unprecedented move, the U.K. watchdog had delayed its final order to block the deal. That allowed it to consider an EU decision to accept Microsoft's pledge to automatically license Activision games to cloud gaming platforms and a licensing deal between Microsoft and rival Sony, maker of the PlayStation console.

The CMA said that it found those developments wouldn't have changed its original decision and imposed an order to block the deal. At the same time, it's considering the new Microsoft proposal, which "is substantially different from what was put on the table previously," said Sarah Cardell, CEO of the U.K. watchdog.

"This is not a green light," Cardell said. "We will carefully and objectively assess the details of the restructured deal and its impact on competition, including in light of third-party comments."

The regulator's decision to launch a new investigation instead of approving the deal was an unexpected move and raises the prospect of another lengthy review, said Alex Haffner, competition partner at U.K. law firm Fladgate.

"In reality, however, it is hard to believe Microsoft would have taken this new course without a high degree of confidence it will now in due course (finally) get a regulatory green light from the CMA," he said by email.

SV 1 9
Bobby
Kotick

ENVIRONMENT

SOLAR PANELS TO SURROUND DULLES AIRPORT WILL DELIVER POWER TO 37,000 HOMES

Travelers taking off and landing at Dulles International Airport outside the nation's capital will soon see an array of 200,000 solar panels laid out near the runways — the largest renewable energy project ever built at a U.S. airport.

Dominion Energy and the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority ceremonially broke ground on the 835-acre project Tuesday.

The solar farm is just a small part of a huge push by Dominion to add 16,000 megawatts of solar capacity — enough to power 4 million homes — by 2035 as it seeks to comply with a state law requiring 100% of its non-nuclear energy production to be zero emission by 2045.

Dominion
Energy

Rural counties in Virginia, though, are pushing back against the solar expansion, as residents complain about the loss of farmland, wrecked viewsheds and construction noise. In recent months, Henry, Pittsylvania, Clarke and Shenandoah counties have all taken steps to restrict or regulate new solar projects.

Bev McKay, a supervisor in Clarke County, said it's unfair rural counties bear the brunt of hosting solar farms.

Urban areas "are huge users of electricity and there is no reason that the urban areas cannot generate their share of solar energy instead of depending on the rural areas to do it for them," he said at a Board of Supervisors meeting last month, according to the meeting minutes.

Others bristle at the increased costs. Dominion and the State Corporation Commission have estimated a 72% increase in electricity costs between 2020 and 2035. And Gov. Glenn Youngkin has suggested the law mandating clean energy production should be revisited.

At Tuesday's groundbreaking, U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., praised local leaders for getting the Dulles project done and spoke of the need to build such projects. But he acknowledged in an interview that his office is receiving increasing complaints about solar farms, and he said the solar projects are just part of the solution to meeting energy needs in a sustainable way.

"This is an issue that's not going away and that's why you can't have a single solution," he said.

Virginia is one of 10 states, along with the District of Columbia, that mandates 100% clean or renewable energy production with deadlines ranging between 2030 and 2050, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Solar energy is a large part of the state's plan, but not the only part. Virginia's law allows nuclear energy to be part of Dominion's portfolio, for example.

The Dulles project adds 100 megawatts of solar generating, plus 50 megawatts of battery storage, enough to power about 37,000 homes. It is expected to create 300 jobs and be completed by 2026.

Dominion says it has already added about 2,000 megawatts of solar power in operation. It has another 7,000 megawatts, including the Dulles project, in various stages of development. That means Dominion will still need to find dozens of additional sites across the state in coming years to reach its 16,000 megawatt target.

Edward Baine, president of Dominion Energy Virginia, said the company works closely with local governments to ensure the projects are palatable. For example, he said some of the

earliest projects lacked vegetative buffers to minimize the visual impact. Now that kind of buffer is standard.

“We want to make sure those counties are satisfied” with how the projects are developed, he said.

For the Dulles project, though, its visibility is a feature, not a flaw. Officials cited the symbolic importance of a massive solar project that will be visible to travelers at the airport, which serves as the region’s hub for international travel.

“The image that they now will see when they look out the window upon landing and see the solar panels that have been installed at this airport is exactly the type of forward image we want to make sure that the world sees,” Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Jeff McKay said.

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